

February 5, 2012

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The Early Fifth Century

Rev. Karel Coppock

INTRODUCTION

Last quarter we were able to do an overview of the first 400 years of Christianity. The further along we are, of course, the more we know. Which is why we spent a good 3 weeks on the last two centuries. Last time we met we looked at four great men of the Church of the 4th century: Jerome, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Martin of Tours. We looked briefly, as well, as the Cappadocian Fathers and at Athanasius whose Trinitarian views and teaching on the Incarnation have so brilliantly affirmed the teaching of the early Church. And of course, we took a peek at the last emperor who effectively ruled over both the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire who also decreed that Christianity was to be the ONLY official religion of the Roman Empire: Theodosius. That brings us to the 5th century, which is, of course, the hinge between the 1000 year domination of Rome and what is commonly known as the Medieval Period. But before we get there we have some important work to do, because the man who did more than any other to shape the theology and practice of the Church in that period which was to come, was a man who lived in the years surrounding the Fall of Rome. With regard to his theological power he is among the greatest thinkers in history. No theologian was more frequently quoted in the Middle Ages. He was beloved of the Reformers. And his books are still being read today. His name of course was Augustine of Hippo.

I. AUGUSTINE: (354–430 C.E.)

Augustine was born in 354 in the little town of Tagaste in North Africa (Algeria). At age 17 his parents sent him to study rhetoric in Carthage, which is roughly located where Tunis, Tunisia is today. His parents wished for him an education which would develop his formidable talents as a writer and speaker. While there he gave himself with pleasure to other pursuits as well, and soon had a concubine and a son. His father was a well to do public official and a catechumen so far as faith is concerned, that is, un-baptised and as yet unable to take communion. His mother Monica was a strong Christian, probably a Berber, though in his early years it is unclear how strong her faith convictions were. While studying rhetoric, Augustine began reading the first century B.C. Roman philosopher Cicero—remember, Jerome had a fondness for this man as well. He came to the conviction that he should do more than merely refine his ability to speak and win arguments; that he should follow the philosopher's advice and seek after truth as well. This led him to Manichaeism, a new religion which came out of Persia in the 3rd century whose founder was a man named Mani. Incidentally, this religion was at one time very widespread, reaching Central Asia and China as well as North Africa. It was a very powerful force in Persia, its country of birth. And at one time there was a chance a part of the world including Central Asia might have converted to it. It taught that in each of us there are two principles at work which have become mingled: light and dark, and that our task consists of separating the two. It was a religion of competing gods, one good and one evil. Marriage was an evil, as it caused the commingling of the two elements within us. It was also the first great

February 5, 2012

syncretistic religion, attempting to combine Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and the teaching of Mani himself. It fascinated Augustine and many other young intellectuals, because it seemed so rational. It ridiculed Christianity whose writings Mani saw as crude. Augustine spent nine years as a “hearer” of this religious philosophy, without ever completely adhering to it. Certain questions of his consistently found no satisfying response. What most troubled him was the problem of evil, how to make sense of a world where there is so much danger, so much badness. The Manichees, of course, taught that goodness, like particles of light, was trapped in darkness and needed to fight their way free, and that their adherents could, perhaps after several lifetimes, do so. This didn't satisfy him. So finally, when the best teacher the Manichees could produce was unable to answer his questions, Augustine, disenchanted, move on. He also moved to Rome, to take a post as a teacher there, but his pupils didn't pay him. So, when a post came up which was vacant in Milan, he moved there. While there his mother began to prepare for an arranged marriage for Augustine, the thing to do when you were rising in the ranks of the professorial and professional class, so, in obedience to his mother he separated from his common-law wife of 13 years. Augustine was heart-broken by sending her away, and often referred to her in future writing as “the one”.

Soon Augustine converted to Neo-Platonism which was essentially an attempt to reach ecstasy by working one's way up through various inferior concentric circles till one reached the Divine source of all reality. One did this through study, self-discipline and contemplation. Neo-Platonism taught that there is only one God at the center of all reality. Evil consists of that which is further and further removed from that Good at the center. Evil is not a real 'thing' but a position, as it were, of degree in distance from the Good.

Augustine seemed quite content with this popular philosophy. It tickled his intellectual fancy and undoubtedly his feelings of superiority as well, as he felt himself closer than most to the Good. There was one problem with all this: his mother Monica. She had been praying for him since he was a small child, that he would find Christ. What's more, she had come to live near him in Milan. Monica attended the Church of Bishop Ambrose. She convinced Augustine that as a professor of rhetoric it was well worth his time to listen in to this famous preacher whose reputation was widely known. So Augustine went. Not because of his interest in Christianity, which he felt was crude, simplistic, and full of violent stories, but because, as a professor of rhetoric, he wished to analyze Ambrose's method of speaking.

Soon, however, Augustine was hooked by what he heard. It became clear to him that Christianity was true. He knew, however, that if he accepted Christ he would have to give up his prestigious position as professor of rhetoric to devote himself fully to Christ, and not only that, but because monasticism and the ascetic call was so present around him, he felt that he would have to give up the pleasure of the flesh as well. As he wrote later in his Confessions, he prayed: “Lord, give me chastity and continence, but not too soon” (Gonzales, page 211). His efforts to conquer the flesh, however, made him realize like Paul that he could never accomplish victory but for the grace of Christ; that Neo-Platonism was a dead end.

He struggled mightily within himself. At this point, the principle translator of the works of the

February 5, 2012

New-Platonists into Latin, a famous philosopher named Marius Victorinus, converted to faith in Christ and made public profession of his faith. Then two high civil servants, having read Athanasius' Life of St. Anthony, abandoned their careers and honors in order to follow Anthony's example and retreat to the desert. It was too much for him. Then one day he felt the Lord speaking to him. He'd been sharing with a friend Alypius. These are his words:

“I flung myself down somehow under a fig-tree and gave free rein to the tears that burst from my eyes like rivers, as an acceptable sacrifice to you. Many thinks I had to say to you, and the gist of them, though not the precise words, was: “O Lord, how long? How long? Will you be angry for ever? Do not remember our age-old sins.” For by these I was conscious of being held prisoner. I uttered cries of misery: “Why must I go on saying, 'Tomorrow...tomorrow'/ why not now? Why not put an end to my depravity this very hour?” I went on talking like this and weeping in the intense bitterness of my broken heart. Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby—perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know—singing over and over again, “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.” My expression immediately altered and I began to think hard whether children ordinarily repeated a ditty like this in any sort of game, but I could not recall ever having heard it anywhere else. I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon; for I had heard the story of how Antony had been instructed by a gospel text. He happened to arrive while the gospel was being read, and took the words to be addressed to himself when he heard, *Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor; you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” So he was promptly converted to you by this plainly divine message. Stung into action, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for on leaving it I had put down there the book of the apostle's letters. I snatched it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted: *Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires. I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.*” (Confessions, Book VIII, #28 and #29, Sister Maria Boulding translator, 1997).

That was it! He resigned as professor of rhetoric and gave himself to the service of Christ. His mother's prayers had been answered. And so began the career of perhaps the greatest theologian of the Church. He and his son received baptism from Ambrose in 387. They prepared to return to North Africa in 388. On the way, waiting at the port of Ostia for the crossing, his mother Monica died. Augustine was devastated. He and his son made the crossing to north Africa and he moved to Thagaste, his native town, where his son, in turn died. He then retired to a life of study and monkish contemplation. At least that was his intention. However, God had other plans.

February 5, 2012

While visiting a friend in the town of Hippo, a friend he hoped to convince to join him in his monastic retreat, he attended church on Sunday morning and the bishop spotted him. His reputation as a writer and speaker had preceded him, so the bishop began preaching about God's sovereign love, and how he sent shepherds among his people to care for his flock and wondered aloud whether there might not be just such a shepherd among them that very day. He asked the congregation to pray for guidance. And lo and behold, when their prayers were done, they looked up, and there was Augustine and they pointed to him. The bishop joined Augustine to him and insisted he stay as God had manifestly called him there; and stay Augustine did. A few years later he was made co-bishop, which, I suppose, would be an associate pastor today. The year was 395. And when the principle bishop died, there he was, solo bishop of the church of Hippo for the remainder of his days. That is where he preached and that is where he wrote.

And wrote he did. Something like 236 titles, not including sermons and letters. He wrote exegetical commentaries on Romans, Genesis and the Psalms. He published books of sermons (more than 350 are extant). One of his books, called On the Trinity, is considered one of his masterpieces and arguably one of the greatest theological works of all time. He also wrote a book called On Free Will, addressing why God gives humans free will that can be used for evil at all. In the year 426 he went through everything he'd written and revised them, changing those ideas that he no longer agreed with, and publishing all the changes in a book called Retractions. His work was so important during his day that people wrote from around the world to have his opinions. And the monastery that he had founded continued under his direction, training priests, monks and bishops who would carry his influence throughout the empire.

So let's look at some of his ideas; ideas that hugely affected theology in the centuries to come, and also threw him into controversy with contemporaries. The first excerpt I'll quote from comes from the Confessions, an spiritual and theological autobiography he published around the year 400 AD.

AUGUSTINE'S IDEAS

"I have no hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou dost enjoin on us continence, 'And when I knew,' saith one, 'that none could be continent except God gave it, this also was itself a part of wisdom, to know whose gift it was' (Wisdom viii. 21, Vulgate). Truly by continence are we bound together and brought back into that unity from which we were dissipated into a plurality. For he loves thee too little who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake. O love that ever burnest and art never quenched! O Charity, my God, enkindle me! Thou commandest continence. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt." Confessions (written c. 400), X.40.

QUESTION: What is Augustine saying here?

This saying deeply troubled a British theologian—probably of Irish origin—who happened to be living in Rome at the time and was shocked by the low state of morality there, named Pelagius. After the sack of Rome he moved to Carthage. His response to Augustine was the following:

February 5, 2012

"...Instead of regarding the commands of our illustrious King as a privilege...we cry out at God, in the scornful sloth of our hearts, and say, 'This is too hard and difficult. We cannot do it. We are only human, and hindered by the weakness of the flesh.' Blind folly and presumptuous blasphemy! We ascribe to the God of knowledge the guilt of twofold ignorance; ignorance of his own creation and of his own commands. As if, forgetting the weakness of men, his own creation, he had laid upon men commands which they were unable to bear. And at the same time (God forgive us!) we ascribe to the Just One unrighteousness and cruelty to the Holy One; the first, by complaining that he has commanded the impossible, the second, by imagining that a man will be condemned by him for what he could not help; so that (the blasphemy of it!) God is thought of as seeking our punishment rather than our salvation....No one knows the extent of our strength better than he who gave us that strength. ... He has not willed to command anything impossible, for he is righteous; and he will not condemn a man for what he could not help, for he is holy." (Documents of the Christian Church, page 52).

QUESTION: What is Pelagius saying here? Can you see what points these two theologians are arguing? Where do you stand?

Pelagius felt we could do just fine, even live sinless lives, without God's help: that we are not affected by sin at birth, but sin by our own free will and can live sinless lives if we try hard enough. Augustine argued that all humankind, including children, are held in the embrace of sin and need the Grace of Christ to be saved and set free.

This debate elucidated Augustine's thinking in several areas, most importantly those relating to the necessity of God's intervention of Grace in our lives to move us into a place of obedience.

Some of the ideas which permeated the Middle Ages and were adopted by the Protestant Reformers a thousand years later for which he is best known were:

- ⤴ The idea that something called original sin affects us all from birth inherited from Adam; hence the necessity of infant baptism.
- ⤴ The idea that the initiative for our conversion comes from God
- ⤴ The conviction that the Grace of Christ is necessary to true freedom of the will and the overcoming of sin
- ⤴ He wrote a treatise on the possibility and conditions of a war that could be considered just.
- ⤴ He dismissed astrology, a popular science since ancient times, as complete nonsense and condemned abortion as had all the church fathers, as murder, if it occurred more than 40 days after conception.

He debated relentlessly with two other antagonists:

1. With the Manichees or Manichaeans concerning their belief that everything we do is predestined. This was the group he'd studied with for many years as a young man.
2. With, one might say, a parallel denomination called the Donatists in North Africa, who

February 5, 2012

were probably largely ethnic Berbers, but who repudiated the Roman Church because they felt that communion and baptism administered by a bishop living in sin was not valid. Augustine argued it was: that God's grace and the faith of the believer was the key, not the life of the bishop dispensing these sacraments.

But he is probably best known today for two works:

- ▲ The Confessions (an autobiography of his spiritual itinerary and the discovery of God's grace) published around the year 400 AD.
- ▲ And a volume called, The City of God. It was published serially over 13 years beginning in 413 AD. Its intent was to answer the questions of Christians and pagans alike as to why the Christian God could allow the fall of Rome.

Let's look first at a few excerpts from The Confessions. I think you'll recognize in them, among his most famous, and most oft quoted lines. But as you look at this, what else do you see? What major themes are here?

“Great are Thou, O lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness, that “Thou resistest the proud”: yet would man praise Thee; he but a particle of Thy creation. Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee. Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which is first, to call on Thee or to praise Thee? And again, to know Thee or to call on Thee? For who can call on Thee, not knowing Thee? For he that knoweth Thee not may call on Thee as other than Thou art. Or is it rather that we call on Thee that we may know Thee? “But how shall they call on Him in Whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a preacher?” And they that seek the Lord shall praise Him. For they that seek shall find Him, and they that find shall praise Him. I will seek Thee, Lord, by calling on Thee; and will call on Thee, believing in Thee; for to us hast Thou been preached. My faith, Lord, shall call on Thee, which Thou hast given me, wherewith Thou hast inspired me, through the Incarnation of Thy Son, through the ministry of the Preacher.” (Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey).

Perhaps the second best known work of Augustine's, The City of God, is a vast history. In it he claims that there are two cities, each built on love as a foundation. The city of God is built on Love of God. The City of Man is built on Love of Self. Gonzales summarizes:

“In human history, [the City of God and the City of Man] always appear mingled with each other. But in spite of this there is between the two of them an irreconcilable opposition, a war to death. In the end, only the City of God will remain. Meanwhile, human history is filled with kingdoms and nations, all built on Love of Self, which are no more than passing expressions of the earthly city. All these kingdoms and nations, no matter how powerful, will wither and pass away, until the end of history, when only the City of God will stand” (pages 215-216).

QUESTION: What do you think of Augustine's idea? Do you think there is an irreconcilable opposition, a war to death, between the City of Man and the City of God?

February 5, 2012

And do you think that the City of Man, the culture, the government, the economy is built entirely on Love of Self?

Augustine's ideas are timeless, but there is another reason that this second work, the City of God is important. It is because of its context. The book was, as it were, a harbinger of an age to come and a curtain on an age passing away. Events had occurred that were causing everyone, Christian and Pagan alike to ask the question "Why?" In the year 410, Rome the Eternal City, had fallen to the barbarians and was sacked by Alaric and the Goths. It was in response to this momentous, world changing event more than any other that Augustine wrote his most famous work, the City of God. He wished to explain to his traumatized and disoriented readers how it was that an Empire which had only recently declared Christianity its sole religion could find itself invaded and sacked by barbarian, Arian armies. Augustine's response was that the only Eternal City was not Rome, but that City whose foundations are laid by God Himself.

He died in 430, 20 years after that first sacking of Rome. He was 75. And even as he lay dying, his beloved city of Hippo, in what is today Tunisia, was being besieged by the Vandals, another Germanic tribe 80,000 of whom had poured into North Africa from Spain. Shortly thereafter, they would sack Hippo and burn it, leaving only Augustine's cathedral and library intact. It was the beginning of what we call in the West, the Medieval Period.

However, the Church of which Augustine had written was to survive the fall of an empire, and times of incredible depredations to become, if anything, stronger than ever.