

This lecture was given by Dr. Frank Gumerlock at the Holy Family High School Lenten series on the evening of March 22, 2011.

## **Saint Augustine's *The City of God***

### **Introduction**

Good evening; and thank you for coming out tonight to hear about Saint Augustine. Please bow your heads with me in prayer.

My Love of Saint Augustine. I have a special affinity for Saint Augustine. My father, who was not raised with any religion, was a convert to Catholicism in the Army. Consequently, he named his eight children with very Catholic names like Dolores Magdalene, Veronica, Monica, and yours truly, Francis Xavier. But my father told me several times that he was going to name me "Augustine Hippo," which if he had done, today you might be calling me "Auggie" or "Tino," but hopefully not "Hippo."

Also, back in the 1980s when I was in biblical school, I was trying to formulate my opinions on the difficult question of the relationship of God's sovereignty and human freedom, and I learned that Augustine had written on these subjects, so I borrowed them and read them. And then in the late 1990s when I was choosing graduate programs, I chose Saint Louis University because of the Augustine scholar who teaches there, Fr. Kenneth Steinhauser, and I was able to work as his research assistant and completed my master's thesis and doctoral dissertation on disciples of Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine and Fulgentius of Ruspe.

After giving a brief overview of Augustine's life, writings, and influence in the Church, I would like to introduce you to one of his great literary works called *The City of God*. Finally, I would like to make some application for us during this Lenten season.

What does Augustine have to say to us today, as we gather here 1650 years later on a continent far away from his that he probably didn't even know existed?

Augustine's Life. Aurelius Augustine was born in 354 in a Roman North African town called Tagaste, which is in modern Algeria. His mother, Monica, was a Catholic Christian whose sarcophagus I saw in Ostia. His father, Patricius, died when Augustine was just sixteen.

Augustine was educated near his hometown, and later went to Carthage to study rhetoric. There he joined the religion of Manichaeism, a Persian Gnostic sect. In Carthage he also cohabited with a girlfriend for over a decade and fathered a son with her, who later was baptized with Augustine and died shortly thereafter when still a teenager.

Augustine eventually became a teacher in Carthage, but got fed up with the profession there. He complained that the students were rowdy and tried to cheat the teachers out of their fees.<sup>1</sup> So in 383 he went to Rome for a year and through a contact got a job as a teacher of rhetoric in Milan in the northern part of Italy. There in Milan Augustine left Manichaeism, experienced his famous conversion in the garden, put away his mistress, and was baptized by Saint Ambrose during the Easter season of 387.

That year his mother died and the next year he went back to Africa. Augustine was about 35 years old at this time. He was only in Africa two years, when while visiting the town of Hippo Regius along the African coast, the bishop ordained Augustine as a priest. Years later when that bishop died, Augustine succeeded him in the bishopric and served as bishop of Hippo for the rest of his life, about 34 more years.

In Hippo, Augustine pastored the church, established a theological school, and also had civil responsibilities acting as a judge arbitrating legal disputes. He attended and exercised leading roles in many of the council at Carthage, and he wrote extensively. He died at age 76 of a fever in the year 430, as Hippo was being besieged by the Vandals.<sup>2</sup>

His Writings. Guess how many books he wrote? Augustine wrote 232 books. These include commentaries on Genesis, the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospel of John, and Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galatians. He wrote his famous *Confessions* and on the subjects of the Trinity, original sin, grace, free will, predestination, perseverance, baptism, teaching, the creed, heresies, and many other subjects. In addition to the 232 books, we have 559 sermons preached by him and 299 letters, with more being discovered all the time. It is estimated that he has left the Church about 5 million words.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine's Influence. Concerning his influence, this doctor of the church is said to be the most influential theologian in the entire history of Christianity, second only to the apostle Paul. His theology of original sin, his explanation of evil as a privation of something good, and his theology of grace have dominated Western theology. His writings against the heresies of the Manichaeans and the Pelagians, and against the schism of the Donatists, resulted in their virtual extinction. His contemporary Saint Jerome wrote of him saying, "Catholics revere and admire you as the restorer of their ancient faith. And, what is a sign of an even greater glory, every heretic hates you."<sup>4</sup>

Within a year or two of Augustine's death, Pope Celestine wrote to the Gauls, recalling Augustine "as a man of eminent learning whom Our predecessors ... reckoned among the greatest doctors... He was loved everywhere and honored by all."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Augustine is credited with starting the whole genre of literature we know as autobiography. He is said to have influenced the medieval political theory of the “two swords,” and to have been responsible for clarifying that the concept of “just war” is compatible with the Christian faith. His theology of grace was the subject of much discussion among the learned in Europe in the ninth century, the sixteenth century, and again in the eighteenth century; and today New City Press in Staten Island is publishing his entire corpus in an English translation for the twenty-first century, releasing several volumes each year.

Two monastic orders, the Augustinian Canons and the Augustinian Friars use his rule, and are devoted to his teachings and writings. Here in the United States Villanova University was established by the Augustinians, and Denver’s own Augustine Institute has on its logo those famous words of his from the first chapter of his *Confessions* “*Fecisti nos ad te*” “You have made us for yourself,” the quote continuing “and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You.”

Now let us now move forward to discuss the *City of God*

### ***The City of God***

The Occasion for His Writing. The occasion was the fall of Rome in 410. In that year the Ostrogoth Alaric and his armies, sacked Rome. They plundered the government buildings and wealthy homes, burned down the city, murdered whoever got in their way, raped women, took others captive—all the atrocities of ancient warfare. The Goths at this time were Arians, that is, they were Christian in name but did not believe in the full divinity of our Lord Jesus. Because of their quasi-Christian religion, when the city was attacked, if people ran for asylum to one of the four or five largest churches in Rome, the

people inside were spared. Consequently, not only Christians fled to those churches but also many pagans did in order to save their lives. As the Goths were nearing the city, others fled the country with little more than the clothes on their back, and lost all of their possessions. So, many of the coastal towns of Sicily, North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean became filled with refugees who had fled the invasion of Rome. Such was the case with Hippo Regius, where Augustine was bishop.

Now when tragedy happens there is usually terrible grief and then blame. The pagan intellectuals among the refugees had a theory about why the so-called “eternal city,” after having flourished for over a thousand years, had fallen. These said that it was because of the rise of Christianity, the worship of the gods had been neglected, and that’s why this atrocity happened.<sup>6</sup> Their argument ran like this. Rome had been free from capture for hundreds of years, but then within two decades after the formal end of public worship of the pagan gods, commanded by the emperor Theodosius in 391, the city fell to the barbarians.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine’s answer. In answer, Augustine wrote *On the City of God*. Its full title is *De civitate Dei contra paganos, On the City of God against the Pagans*. It is an apologetic work designed in Augustine’s own words “to refute the enemies of the city of God, who prefer their gods to Christ.”<sup>8</sup> He began writing it in 413 and released it in installments of a few books at a time until he finished it over a decade later.

First, Augustine shatters their arguments and then he sets forth positively an explanation for the fall of Rome. Augustine points out that floods, fires, and civil wars had happened in Rome’s history previously while everyone was worshipping the Roman gods. So the recent tragedy is not related to the neglect of worship of the gods, because

even when people were worshipping the gods, things like that happened. As for people being taken captive, and tortured and put to death, Augustine shows that this happened to Marcus Regulus, a Roman general of the first Punic War, and no one impugned the Roman gods for it, but now people want to impugn the Christian God.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, he says, these refugees should be thankful to the Christian God for sparing them when the city was sacked. It was the custom in ancient warfare for conquerors to plunder the temples in the city that was being overthrown. But in this recent sack of the city of Rome, the Goths had mercy on the people in the Christian churches. And for that mercy, they should be thankful to the Christian God, rather than blaming of Him. “That you are alive is due to God, who spares you that you may be admonished to repent and reform your lives,” he writes.<sup>10</sup>

Rome’s vulnerability, Augustine said, came from internal decay and moral decadence, not the anger of some pagan god for not being worshipped.<sup>11</sup> And these refugees should use this tragedy to flee from their vices and take refuge in the name of Christ. For, when God “exposes us to adversities, it is ...to correct” us.<sup>12</sup>

The Two Cities. More positively, Augustine gives some answers and reasons for the fall of Rome. He explains the tragedy with this principle: “The whole age of the world is the career of two cities” or societies of people<sup>13</sup>—the city of man or the earthly city, which is built upon a lust to rule and interested in the glorification of *man*; and the heavenly city, the city of God, which has been founded for the purpose of showing forth the *glory of God*. This first city is temporary and transitory. Kingdoms in the city of man rise and fall, come and go.<sup>14</sup> This city will not be everlasting, for it will no longer be a

city when it has been sent to its final penalty.<sup>15</sup> The city of God, however, which is the Church, is an everlasting and permanent city, an eternal kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Then for 22 books, Augustine describes these two cities, compares and contrasts them, and in the last few books talks about their respective destinies.

The Basis of the Two Cities in Scripture. Scripture in Gen 4:17 says that Cain, who did not obey God, “built a city,” and that was the beginning of the city of man.<sup>17</sup> But the godly line—Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel, David, the prophets, and ultimately the Church of Jesus Christ, represents the city of God. In the New Testament, these two cities are mentioned in the epistles of Saint Paul. In Gal 4:25-26 he says that Hagar corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.”<sup>18</sup> In Philippians 3:20 Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle writes, “By faith he [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land...for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Heb 11:9-10) And a little later he says about those who died in faith, “they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one” and God “has prepared a city for them.” (Heb 11:16)

Then in the Book of Revelation, John sees two cities contrasted, Babylon “the mother of all abominations” (Rev 17:5) whom God judges very severely, representing the city of man,<sup>19</sup> and the new Jerusalem adorned as a bride for her husband, representing the city of God. About the city of God, Jesus said to the church at Philadelphia in Rev 3:12:

“He who overcomes... I will write upon him ... the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven.”

Characteristics of These Two Cities. “A people,” Augustine says, “is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement,” and “in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love.”<sup>20</sup> The two cities “were made by two loves: the earthly city by the love of self unto the contempt of God, and the heavenly city by the love of God unto the contempt of self.”<sup>21</sup> The earthly city is motivated by the glory of domination and rule, the city of God, by true glory.<sup>22</sup> The earthly city is “founded in the material good of this world,” the city of God is founded upon hope in God.<sup>23</sup> The earthly city is often divided against itself with litigations, wars, and quarrels. Its victories are also very short lived. The city of God on the other hand will have never-ending peace and eternal victory.<sup>24</sup>

In this life, there is a certain amount of beauty, peace, prosperity, health, safety, and advantages, which the good and wicked enjoy together, which we are to pray for, and which is to be attributed to God who grants the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike. But this beauty and peace is temporal and it is a lower kind of good, not to be loved in preference to God, the eternal and unchangeable good.<sup>25</sup>

Both cities are “in this present world commingled, and as it were entangled together”<sup>26</sup> running “in their course amid mankind.”<sup>27</sup> “In this fleeting course of time,” the city of God “sojourns as a stranger in the midst of the ungodly,” but shall one day “dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal seat, which it now with patience waits for.”<sup>28</sup>

The Final End of the Two Cities. In Book 15, Augustine writes that “out of one mass handed over to merited damnation, God made some vessels of wrath to dishonour



and other vessels of mercy to honour; in punishment rendering to the former what is due, in grace giving the latter what is not due.”<sup>29</sup> Babylon, the city of man, eventually will be “thrown down with violence,” and her smoke will rise “forever and ever.” (Rev 18:21; 19:3) For, “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone which is the second death.” (Rev 21:8) But the destiny of the city of God is “peace in eternal life,”<sup>30</sup> “the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God”<sup>31</sup> when “He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.” (Rev 21:4) When the church militant becomes the church triumphant we “shall enjoy a sound immortality and incorruption, and shall have no more vices...and this condition shall be eternal...But, on the other hand, they who do not belong to this city of God shall inherit eternal misery, which is also called the second death.”<sup>32</sup>

As you can see Augustine’s *City of God* is not utopian, but according to one reviewer it is surely a “book of realistic hope.”<sup>33</sup>

Now, what does Augustine have to say to us today?

### **Lessons from the *City of God* for Us**

In these last few minutes, I would like to focus on three things concerning our own citizenship in the city of God. 1) Gaining citizenship in the city of God 2) Responsibilities of citizenship in the city of God, and 3) A benefit of that citizenship.

Gaining Citizenship in the City of God. Augustine would challenge us today and say, “Which city are you a citizen of? The one that is temporal, out for its own glory, living in contempt of God, and is ultimately judged with eternal punishment? Or the one

that is eternal and lives for the glorification of God and in turn is glorified by God for ever and ever?

Augustine would call on us to call upon the Lord, as Abel did. The highest and complete terrestrial duty of the city of God, he said, is exemplified in Abel who called upon the name of the Lord and trusted in the mercy of God.<sup>34</sup> Let's talk about that mercy. God the Father sent God the Son to become flesh for us. He needed to be man to die and God to save, for who can save but God alone? And the most wonderful transaction in all of human history happened on the cross. The sins of the world were imputed to him and he took the penalty for it, and then He imputed His righteousness to us who believe. As St. Paul says, "What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to condemn sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us." (Rom 8:3-4) And when God remits our sin and acquits us, who can condemn us? Paul continued, saying that Jesus, "who knew no sin" became a sacrifice for sin on our behalf, "that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21).

Citizenship in the city of God means paying homage to the founder and governor of that city, the Lord Jesus Christ, the true "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Rev 19:16), whom God the Father gave as head over all things to the Church (Eph 1:22), who gave Him "a name above every name" (Phi. 2:9), who committed all judgment to Him in heaven and on earth (John 5:27; Matt 28:18). Augustine calls us to this founder and maker and putting our life in His hands, we are "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of His beloved Son." (Col 1:13). For, he writes, "In this...consists the righteousness of a man, that he submit himself to God, his body to his

soul, and his vices...to his reason...and also that he beg from God grace to do his duty, and the pardon of his sins, and that he render to God thanks for all the blessings he receives.”<sup>35</sup>

Responsibilities as a Citizen of the City of God. I think Augustine would tell us today that one of our chief responsibilities as a citizen of the city of God is to bring the city of God to our relationships, starting with our families by being loving, dutiful, and forgiving as husbands and fathers, as wives and mothers, and as children to our parents, teachers, and those in authority. He would say that we ought to strive for harmony in this most basic of human societies. For, in his words, “domestic peace has a relation to civic peace.” And, families need to live in faith and look not for their peace in earthly advantage but seek “the eternal blessings which are promised.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps during this Easter season we can start some family traditions that are centered on the redemptive work of Christ. Maybe watching a movie together about Jesus, doing a Scripture reading together, perhaps fast and pray together as a family, or going to a special church service, or doing a service project. These, of course, are just ideas whereas the substance is to focus on that salvific work of our Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf, celebrated in this season.

In our broader relationships, we can pray this season for reconciliation of that relationship that has gone south. Someone once said we need an ample cemetery to bury the faults of our friends; and Jesus told us to love our enemies and love our neighbors, because often they are the same. We are to mortify the deeds of our sinful nature and walk in the Holy Spirit, and in so doing truly bring the kingdom of God, or the city of God, to our sphere of influence.

In the workplace, we can bring justice, fairness, and honesty. We can abstain from slander. In whatever we do, we can “labor not for the meat that perishes, but for that which endures to eternal life,” (John 6:27) and we can let zeal for God’s house consume us.

Benefits of Citizenship in the City of God. Finally, Augustine would remind us of a great benefit of citizenship in the city of God, eternal perspective in the face of tragedy. No one is free from suffering in this life. We all have it to one degree or another—death, problems with children, financial problems. Some of you are facing the empty nest, which is a not very pleasant. We have the comfort of Jesus saying “I know your tribulation and your poverty” (Rev 2:9).

Augustine would say let God use those sufferings to correct us of our selfishness, our craving for wealth, and our lust of the flesh. Let God use them to restrain our anger, our desire to advance socially, or our relishing of flattery.”<sup>37</sup>

And finally, he would say with the apostle Paul: Know that these momentary light afflictions are nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory (cf. 2 Cor 4:17). Let me repeat this: These momentary light afflictions are nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> James J. O’Donnell, “Augustine the African,” 2.  
<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/twayne/aug1.html>. Accessed March 19, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> On Augustine’s life, O’Donnell, “Augustine the African”; Robert Payne, “The Dark Heart Filled with Light,” *Christian History* 67 (2001):10-17; Bruce L. Shelley, “The Bishop at Work,” *Christian History* 67 (2001): 20-23; Garry Willis, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999); Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography* (New York: Dorset, 1967); J.M. Flood, *The Mind and Heart of Augustine. A Biographical Sketch* (Fresno, CA: Academy Guild, 1960); Hugh Pope, *St. Augustine of Hippo* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1949); Giovanni Papini, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1930); T.C. Porter, *The Life and Labors of St. Augustine*. Philip Schaff, trans. (New York: J.C. Riker, 1854).

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<sup>3</sup> Hubertus R. Drobner, "Studying Augustine. An overview of recent research," in Robert Dodaro and George Lawless, eds., *Augustine and His Critics. Essays in honour of Gerald Bonner* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18-34; Vernon J. Bourke, *Augustine's Quest for Wisdom. His Life, Thought and Works* (Albany, NY: Magi, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Jerome, *Epistle* 141.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Celestine I, *Letter 21*. Cited in Prosper of Aquitaine, *Against Cassian*, 21.2. ACW 32:135.

<sup>6</sup> *City of God*, 1.1. *The City of God by Saint Augustine*. Marcus Dods, trans. (New York: Random House, 1950), 4.

<sup>7</sup> O'Donnell, "Augustine the African," 5.

<sup>8</sup> *City of God*, 18.1. Dods, 609.

<sup>9</sup> *City of God*, 1.24. Dods, 29.

<sup>10</sup> *City of God*, 1.34. Dods, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Yandell, "The City of God: Augustine's Timeless Classic about the Timeless City," *Christian History* 15 (1987): 22-24 at 24.

<sup>12</sup> *City of God*, 1.29. Dods, 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine defines a city as "a civic community, which is nothing else than a multitude of men bound together by some associating tie." *City of God*, 15.8. Dods, 489.

<sup>14</sup> *City of God*, 4.7; 17.10. Dods, 114, 591.

<sup>15</sup> *City of God*, 15.4. Dods, 481.

<sup>16</sup> *City of God*, 5.16; 16.2. Dods, 166, 523.

<sup>17</sup> *City of God*, 15.7-8. Dods, 487-8.

<sup>18</sup> *City of God*, 11.7; 15.2. Dods, 351, 480.

<sup>19</sup> *City of God*, 17.16; 18.2, 22; 19.26. Dods, 598, 611, 628, 707.

<sup>20</sup> *City of God*, 19, 24. Dods, 706.

<sup>21</sup> *City of God*, 14.28. Dods, 477. Quoted in Yandell, "The City of God," 24.

<sup>22</sup> *City of God*, 5.19. Dods, 171-3.

<sup>23</sup> *City of God*, 15.21. Dods, 509.

<sup>24</sup> *City of God*, 15.4. Dods, 481-2.

<sup>25</sup> *City of God*, 15.22; 19.13, 26. Dods, 510, 601, 706.

<sup>26</sup> *City of God*, 11.1. Dods, 346.

<sup>27</sup> *City of God*, 18.1. Dods, 609.

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<sup>28</sup> *City of God*, 1.Preface. Dods, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *City of God*, 15.21. Dods, 510.

<sup>30</sup> *City of God*, 19.11. Dods, 686.

<sup>31</sup> *City of God*, 19.13. Dods, 690.

<sup>32</sup> *City of God*, 19.27-28. Dods, 708-9.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Marty, "A Tale of Two Cities" *Christian History* 67 (2001): 24.

<sup>34</sup> *City of God*, 15.21. Dods, 509.

<sup>35</sup> *City of God*, 19.27. Dods, 708.

<sup>36</sup> *City of God*, 19.17. Dods, 695.

<sup>37</sup> *City of God*, 1.9-10. Dods, 11-16.