

Justice, Order and Peace: A Reading of Augustine's *City of God, Book XIX*, in the Light of His Conversion Experience

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Introduction

Why *The City of God, Book XIX*?

Augustine's *City of God* was written in the wake of Constantine's Edict of Milan issued in 315. This world-changing event led many people to the deep conviction that "only a strong government can assure people of peace and enable them to live without fear of social disorder" (Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*, 109). At the same time, these people had to deal with a most dreadful event, the sack of Rome by Alaric's Goths on August 24, 410. This tragedy put the question of justice, order, and peace crucially to the test. Its impact may be compared to the impact on the modern world of the terrorist assault of Sept. 11, 2001: the fall of Rome marked the first wholly successful attack upon a civilization that had existed for more than 1,000 years.

Augustine's *magnum opus et arduum* presents humankind as belonging either to the earthly city, symbolised by Babylon, or to the City of God, represented by the heavenly Jerusalem. Throughout human history both cities develop and increase when man acts either moved by selfish or sacrificial love (De Civ. Dei, XIV, 28). Both cities struggle with justice, order and peace, and this struggle is particularly complex given the fact that the cities are intertwined in this world. It is difficult to perceive the distinction between justice as practised in the Earthly City and that pursued by the City of God. Book XIX can be considered as a highlight of Augustine's reflection on these issues. At the same time, this struggle for clarity is similar to the one Augustine himself underwent at the time of his conversion. The question was how to put right order or justice in one's life, or how to live according to wisdom which leads to an everlasting happiness or peace (Conf. VII, 3, 7-8, 10). The *City of God* is for Augustine a new occasion to reflect on the same issues made of man's instability and uncertainty, signs of imbalance and injustice, applied to the political and religious societies of his time.

1. Augustine's view of "justice" rooted in his conversion experience

Book XIX starts with an analysis of the ways philosophers propose to reach happiness and peace, as laid out in 288 sects of Varro's *De Philosophia*. Augustine himself underwent this quest for happiness when he attended Manichean circles for ten years. He is aware of the great variety of combinations of virtues and pleasures man considers and tries out in order to reach a life of peace and happiness. This great variety of solutions is a sign of instability which deeply affects man's heart. Man is hesitant about how to coordinate the duty of virtue with pleasure. Consequently, he is marked by a great uncertainty, which is a source of bitter inward struggles (De Civ. Dei XIX, 1-3).

Having left the Manicheans, Augustine looked for answers in the writings of Plato and Plotinus, causing him to ask whether the conflicts created by instability and uncertainty in one's conduct could be overcome by the solution of fusion with the ONE?

a. Augustine's *kairos* moment: a difference between Creator and creature

Instead of fusion, Augustine underwent an experience which completely reoriented his life. He experienced the fundamental difference between **Creator and creature**. This event stands at the beginning of a revelation for a new kind of order with regard to the question about how to relate “virtue and pleasure”. Augustine’s conversion process is made up of two phases:

- a. the recognition of man’s sinfulness, expressed by injustice, uncertainty, and restlessness (Conf. VIII, 1-8);
- b. the recognition of God’s presence within man, calling him to coordinate “virtue and pleasure” according to the new order or justice revealed in Christ (Conf. X, 6-7 and XI, 8). This “new order” is for single men and women, for the family, for the city, and for the universe (De Civ. Dei XIX, 5-7.14).

b. New order and God’s Providence

The “new order” Augustine started to put into his own life is an expression of God’s providence. It was God’s providence that led Augustine from pagan presumption to the Christian confession of sin and praise of God. At the same time Augustine perceived justice as God’s divine dedication to all creatures. His experience led him to two convictions: 1. The purpose of creation is just; it aims at God’s goodness. 2. God’s mode of government is just. His justice is expressed by creation, by a call to conversion, and by the recreation/formation of man, in conformation with the *forma omnium* which is Christ (De Civ. Dei, I, 1. 8; II, 7; IX, 15.17; X, 22, 24.29; XII, 6; XIII, 23; XV, 27; XVIII, 41; XX, 5.6.30;).

The revelation of God’s justice and man’s capacity to respond with justice to God’s call, (i.e. to give to God what is due to God), makes a new order possible. This order does not only consist in single acts of justice when man gives to everyone his or her due, but it is based upon the recreation of the whole single human being. From now on, Augustine’s view of justice is rooted in God’s Providence which has acted, acts and will continue to act to establish the Church and take care of her within the world.

c. Love/*Caritas*: a theological principle for the constitution of the person and the community

For Augustine, virtues in general and the virtue of justice in particular are not questions of mere behavior or doing. Augustine distinguished the traditional-juridical view of justice from justice that is an aspect of the supreme love of God. “I maintain nothing to be virtue, except God’s Supreme Love”. Consequently, virtue is for Augustine a question of being. The four cardinal virtues of classical antiquity are the various movements of God’s *caritas*. Prudence is love which discerns what leads to God; temperance is steadfast love for God; justice is love, which serving only God, governs well what is submitted to it; finally, fortitude is love that undergoes whatever test that God requires (De Mor. Eccl, I, 15-25).

God’s *caritas* is at the origin of the world and of man. His love calls man to walk toward the achievement of creation. This achievement is to love without end in the City of God. Justice plays its part in this process in so far as it governs well what is submitted to man. This means for Augustine that the soul governs the body, reason governs vice, and God governs the soul and the reason (De Civ. Dei XIX, 23). When this happens, justice is not the result of a common acknowledgment of rights and duties or the result of common interests, but the expression of man’s love for God as God ought to be loved, and of man’s love of his neighbor as himself.

2. Three fundamental issues of justice

a. Justice, as a call to commit to a way of life that ends up in eternal peace

Peace depends on justice put into practise by all the members of a human society. There are structures which foster the establishment of justice and peace such as the family, the city, the created world. Everybody looks for peace, even robbers or other evil doers. Even in the world of animals, beasts lay aside their ferocity, like the tigress that gently purrs over her cubs and fondles them. A certain justice that creates order within things is necessary even to those who are perverted, otherwise there would be no existence (De Civ. Dei, 11).

The question of order even for evildoers leads Augustine to consider in XIX, 13 the case of Satan. For Augustine the nature of the devil was not originally evil, for God cannot create something evil. Evil is a perversion of the will, bent aside from God (Conf. VII, 16). This perversion happened when the devil “did not abide in the truth” (John 8:44) that is he did not abide in the tranquillity of God’s order. God did not punish the good he had created, because it was still in the nature of the devil to desire peace. The devil’s punishment consists in the pain he experiences through the loss of what he had enjoyed. Similarly, God’s justice is the preservation of his order even for evildoers when they bewail in anguish the loss of the advantages they enjoyed and perceive that these were justly taken from them by God whose liberality they had despised.

Augustine highlights the difficulties that underlie the commitment to justice as a way of life leading to eternal peace. Friendship within a family may be threatened by treacheries; civil justice is not exempted from miseries that affect the judge, the accuser, the witness, the false witness, the accused, be he guilty or innocent. Augustine highlights errors of human judgments when the truth is hidden; he stresses injustice caused by the diversity of languages that hinders the intervention of men; finally, he mentions the misery of wars, including those that are called “just”. In this context, Augustine’s fundamental question is not that of how to know if a war is just, but how to maintain the idea of happiness made of justice and peace in a world that is so miserable. This misery is so great that men finish with preferring an unjust peace to the just peace of God (De Civ. Dei XIX, 6-7).

For this reason it is not enough that man’s desire strives for justice. Neither is justice a question of mere human feelings. Justice is a matter of choice, even a crucial choice. There are those who prefer what is right to what is wrong, and what is well ordered to what is perverted. Those who prefer what is right see that the peace of unjust men is not worthy to be called peace in comparison with the peace of the just (De Civ. Dei XIX, 12). To make the choice in favor of the Supreme Good means to reject evil. This choice cannot be made without reflection, consideration, contemplation, prayer, all of which have to be prior to action. Therefore, before tackling the great questions of social, political, and economic justice in this world, Augustine recommends above all the establishment of the reign of justice and peace in man’s own heart. If there is a war to wage, then this war must be the one that puts order into man’s intimate life.

b. Justice as a capacity of submission

Augustine argues: “We do not have in ourselves power to live rightly, but can do so only if he (God) who has given us faith to believe in his help do help us when we believe and pray” (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 4). Therefore, justice is a teaching to be received and a learning to be put in

practise under the guidance of another. This is precisely what happened at the time of Augustine's conversion process. He struggled with the submission to a just order of nature that exists in man, an order where the soul and the spirit are subjected to God, and the flesh is subjected to the soul (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 4).

In his quest for happiness, order and peace, Augustine followed ways proposed by philosophers such as Varro, Plato and the ancient Academy. He shared their deep conviction that the quest for happiness can only be pursued through social life. In practise however, Augustine is led to the conclusion that faith alone gives access to the Supreme Good. Pride prevents the philosophers from taking this road, while humility disposes man to receive the revelation of God who is beyond man, and at the same time intimately present in him. Thus, Augustine associated "righteous living" (*recte nobis esse uiuendum*) to the righteous man who finds life through faith which is submission to God (*iustus ex fide uiuit* – Gal 3:11). This principle verified in his own life, becomes the central theme of his entire *City of God* where God reveals his justice when he resists the one who is proud, but accords his favor to the humble (Pr 3:34) (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 27).

For Augustine peace is associated to the intimate desire of people to be governed. There is no peace without a strong government and there is no justice without the submission of all the members of a human society to this government (XIX, 12). The City of God that attracts all kinds of persons, does not make exception to this rule. She lives in submission to God, depending on his assistance. The righteous person who lives by faith desires to be governed by God. Consequently the righteous do not seek peace in the earthly advantages of this life, but relate all earthly advantages to the only truly peace, which is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God (De Civ. Dei XIX, 17). The rulers of this world can serve those whom they seem to command in so far as they set limits to the powers activated at the moment of the fall. They can direct men towards an ethical commitment marked by justice. However, they can never abolish or avoid fundamental injustice or evil. Only that justice that is submission to God gives access to a life where injustice may be definitely overcome.

c. Justice through the use of temporal goods reveals the temporal or eternal purpose of peace

For Augustine, God is the Creator and most just Ordainer of all natures (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 13). Within the world all men are called to put justice into practise through the good things given to them such as health, safety, human fellowship, light, shelter, beauty, which are things needful for preservation and recovery of peace. By making use of these things man is called to progress toward God. In practise, however, the use of these things reveals two categories of people. The first uses them for the establishment of earthly peace; the second, who are members of the heavenly City, will use them for the ultimate purpose of eternal peace. Thus, Christian life is not a flight from responsibilities, a life beyond human realities, but daily commitment to make progress toward God through righteous living by faith.

In this world the use of goods for the purpose of earthly peace is marked by pride, perversion of intelligence, and pleasure of the five senses. The use of goods for the purpose of heavenly peace is marked by humility, wisdom, and charity. Both are intertwined in the image of the Earthly and the Heavenly Cities. Consequently, the use of good even for the purpose of the Heavenly City is inseparable from prayer, because in our mortal condition reason is pressed down by the corruptible body; it has no perfect authority over vice. Consequently, Augustine

sees our righteousness rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues. The prayerful demand of “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” is needed by the righteous. The remission of sins or active mercy is a fundamental, perhaps even *the* fundamental aspect in Augustine’s view of justice. Augustine adds to this prayer the petitions that beg from God the grace to do his duty as well as that which renders to God thanks for all the blessings received (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 27). Thus, the members of the City of God progress toward the final peace to which all our righteousness is related. In its pilgrim state the City of God possesses this peace by faith. The difficulty is to adjust our desires to God’s will and to his gifts in order to reach that eternal peace, which is the ultimate purpose of every good action towards God and man in this world (De Civ. Dei, XIX, 17).

Conclusion

In Augustine’s thought, justice without order and peace does not make sense. For this reason, Augustine does not consider justice as an absolute norm of human ethics. Justice exists only in relationship to peace and order. “Peace of all things is the tranquillity of the order” and “order is the distribution which allots things equal and unequal (like body, soul, reason, God), each to its own place” (De Civ. Dei XIX, 13). In this world man is hesitant and confused when it comes to giving priority to one thing over the other. After a long struggle within himself, Augustine discovers in the practise of justice as a virtue God’s providential tool given to man in order to reach what Augustine expressed in his most famous exclamation found at the beginning of his *Confessions*: “Thou movest us to delight in praising You; for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You” (Conf. I,1).

The absolute norm is heavenly peace. The desire for peace dominates all living beings: peoples, nations, cities, families, and the single person. Even evildoers strive for peace and for a life in peace. In this world, however, peace can never reach a definitive stability; it can never be as perfect as to exclude all injustice, be it dispute, war, or calamity. Those who belong to the City of God share with all mankind the disappointment to never reach eternal and definite peace in this world. What makes the members of the City of God different from those of the Earthly City is their certainty to be in possession of the heavenly peace by faith and hope. The possession of this heavenly peace through faith and hope is what ultimately drives their efforts for justice.

The dynamic principle of Augustine’s ethics is this peace that he termed beatitude revealed by God as realized in the Heavenly City. The practice of justice only leads to this peace through the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law (De Civ. Dei XIX, 13). By doing so, the righteous live already in this world beyond the desires and capacities of mortal mankind. In this world, the righteous walk with God, a God who reveals his justice by humbling himself, by becoming man’s “assistant”, and by making himself present to a mortal man’s conscience (Conf. VII, 10). Here, in the secret of man’s heart God, the Interior Master, urges man to act righteously not by means of evidence caused by tangible facts, but by means of faith and hope that carry a mortal man beyond the evidence of claims made by human justice incapable of realizing and reaching eternal peace.

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