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ST. AUGUSTINE'S MESSAGE FOR TO-DAY

BY THE REV. T. A. GURNEY, M.A., LL.B.

I

HARNACK thinks so highly of the influence of Augustine that he describes him as "incomparably the greatest man whom, between Paul and Luther the Reformer, the Church possessed"; and he even declares that it would almost seem as if the miserable existence of the Roman Empire was providentially prolonged for the express purpose of affording an opportunity for the influence of Augustine to be exerted upon universal history. There can be no doubt as to the potency of that influence upon all the after-life and thought of the Church. And it is all the better worth studying to-day because, in so many respects, his standpoint and problems are parallel with our own.

Augustine was both unique and universal. There are a few men—Plato, Socrates, Paul—who are examples of both. He was unique, for he was raised up for a unique task at a unique moment, and it is hard to see how that task could have been accomplished except by one specially and divinely equipped for it. Like Paul he was a "chosen vessel." All the circumstances of his parentage, his home, his environment, his training, his life-calling, his temperament, converged upon his future mission. The note of time is one of the most important of these influences. "He stood,"¹ it has been said, "at the watershed of two worlds. The old world was passing away; the new world was entering into its heritage, and a man was needed to mediate the transference of the culture of the one to the other." Augustine was that man. "He gathered up into himself all that the old world had to offer, and, recoinng it, sent it forth again bearing the stamp of his profound character."

Augustine was, in no ordinary sense, the creature of his own time—a fact which enabled him to be the creator of the time that followed. He felt in his own personality the conflict of ideals which it so vividly illustrates. Like our own the Age was one of transition, with the large expectations and bitter disillusionments which belong to such crises. The morning of dazzling hope which had burst upon nascent Christendom with the Decree of Milan, forty years before Augustine was born (A.D. 313), and of which young Athanasius had sung with such passionate fervour in his glowing *De Incarnatione*, had already passed away. While it lasted, it had "seemed as though the servants of Christ were sitting amid the beauty of peace, and in tabernacles of confidence, and in rich repose."² It was "a golden prime," and, for the Church of the East especially, "a long, bright, Paschal festival."³ But it had soon passed away. The

¹ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Art. "Augustine."

² Bright, *Age of the Fathers*, pp. 9-11.

³ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*.

"demons" had not, after all, "been utterly" and finally "put to shame," though "The King had come forth," indeed, "and His glory had flashed upon men."

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!"¹

But the years that followed had been overclouded by the partial recovery of Heathenism, in more seductive and dangerous forms. The air was thickened by the spirit of compromise. Augustine found it, on his return, late on in life, as a bishop, to Madaura. Apart from the action of the "Old Believers,"² as Dr. Sihler calls them, under the apostate emperor Julian, the spread of Neoplatonism, the revival of nature-faiths, the social abuses of the Empire, the partial character even of Constantine's own conversion—all had made the victory of Christianity incomplete. There is truth both in Gibbon's³ admission and in his reservation: "The religion of Constantine achieved in less than a century the final conquest of the Roman empire; but the victors themselves were insensibly subdued by the arts of their vanquished rivals." So the century which saw the Faith of Christ for the first time a *Religio licita* became a century of bitter disappointment, of rude awakenings to terrible facts, of strong and glaring contrasts between the pleasant seeming of things and their ghastly realities. The larger background of Augustine's life is the Empire as a whole, especially in the West. And there was the appearance here of a gigantic strength which was found on examination barely to conceal appalling weakness. Rome—"aurata Roma"—sat the enthroned mistress of the world, city of gilded palaces, her Forum so crowded with statues, the reminders of a greater past, that her living men could scarcely move there, her huge historic buildings flinging their flaunting challenge across a conquered universe. Yet glaring poverty, age-long weariness, gloomy slums, universal discontent, slow-footed destruction, lurked like ghostly shades behind all the golden brightness. The "dusk of the gods" had already flung its twilight shadows across the faded glories of heathen temples, but the Christian splendours of a later age had not yet replaced them. "The gilded Capitol," writes Jerome from his retreat at Bethlehem, "is in a mean condition; all the temples of Rome are covered with soot and cobwebs. The city is being dislodged from its foundations, and the people who formerly gathered like a flood before the half-tumbled-down shrines now run to the mounds of the martyrs."⁴ The climax which marked almost the close of Augustine's life was a fitting parable of the whole travesty of a fallen greatness. Young Honorius swept in triumph up the Sacred Way, bringing back his court from Ravenna, within five years of the fatal day when Alaric, hearkening to the mysterious voices that had come to him in the Pannonian forests, urging him to

¹ Wordsworth's *Prelude*, bk. XI.

² Sihler's *From Augustus to Augustine*, c. IX.

³ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chap. XXVIII.

⁴ Sihler, *From Augustus to Augustine*, p. 307.

advance and destroy the city, swept down upon it and starved it, and then, two years after, besieged and sacked it. No wonder that after such culminating disappointments Augustine turned with relief from the City of the Cæsars, with its Babylonian greatness and fall, to that City of God which "stands and grows for ever," and has its everlasting foundations rooted in righteousness and peace. In this trying experience of overturning kingdoms we too share his vicissitudes and hopes; and it has been well said that ¹ "it is in that hope of the final triumph of the City of God that the course of this world becomes intelligible, for then we see that the rise and fall of earthly empires, the glories of ancient civilizations, the sufferings of men in their ruin, have not been unmeaning and vain."

Three men, at the end of the fourth century, stood forth as, in different ways, the leaders of the world's thought: St. Ambrose at Milan, St. Jerome in his cell at Bethlehem, and St. Augustine at Hippo; but Augustine towers not only above both his compeers—more profound than Ambrose, his spiritual father; more original and systematic than Jerome, his correspondent—but also above those of a later age, such as Gregory the Great (A.D. 590–604), whom he may be said to have trained for the Papal throne. And this was due primarily to his personal characteristics. For he had the unique genius which, when it comes into contact with truth, not merely interprets it to others, and passes it on, but assimilates it and absorbs it, giving it forth again stamped with the seal of its own individuality. His greatness lies, it has been said,² in his "synthesis of opposing tendencies." His rich, many-sided nature appropriated from all sources the truth he made his own, and then gave it forth—no longer as abstract truth, but as truth vitalized, interpenetrated, transformed by his own magnetic personality.

It is just this power of synthesis which distinguishes both St. Augustine and St. Paul. Both men were divinely called to a similar world-mission as the mediators in an epoch of transition between the old and the new. This is what brings Augustine into sympathy with the spirit of our own day. Like St. Paul, he needed for his task an outlook broad and sympathetic. The hope of success for each lay in such an assimilation of truth that it could come forth from themselves as it were molten and recoined, stamped with the vital impress of their own individuality. And in both alike we mark this "synthesis of opposing tendencies." There is a realism in them both that makes vital their whole association with thought. They never grasp truth in the abstract, or as a dead thing, but with the intensity of their whole being, giving themselves wholly to its influence; and, when they give it forth, giving it as a giving of themselves to men. This passion for reality forbids their ever becoming theological dialecticians. What the mind realizes as convincing, the heart appropriates as satisfying, and, therefore, it becomes absolutely essential that it should be forthwith communicated to others. "Woe is me, if I preach not the Gospel." The emphasis of truth is

¹ Cunningham's *S. Austin*, p. 114.

² Workman, *Christian Thought to the Reformation*, p. 113.

always present with each. Neither Paul nor Augustine scoff at words as "idle words," "which half reveal, and half conceal, the truth within." For words to each were expressions of reality never to be trifled with. "I accuse not words," cries Augustine, speaking even of his heathen studies, "for words are choice and precious vessels. I accuse the wine of error that drunken doctors pour out for us into these fair goblets."

This determination to find an ultimate reconciliation for thought, even the most diverse and conflicting, to get down to the "Greatest Common Measure" of truth, to make words explain and justify themselves, and reclothe themselves to fulfil a fresh human service, is what marks Augustine as the teacher of thought-method not only for that age but for our own. He is modern, perhaps one may still say Baconian,¹ in his devotion to truth whenever and wherever found. It has to be followed and loved for its own sake, however strange the robe it wears. "Perhaps the most striking thing," writes Professor Cunningham,² "in the personal character of St. Augustine, as it stands out before us in his own writings, is his devotion to truth wherever it is found, not only truth in revelation, but truth in the form we specially prize to-day—empirical truth as detected through the senses in scientific investigation." "It almost seems," he adds, "when we read the *Confessions* as if Christianity won him not so much through the promise of deliverance from sin as by affording him a solution of the mysteries of the intelligible world." It is specially helpful to-day to find a man confronted, in an age of vast transitions, with problems of all kinds—scientific, psychological, spiritual, historical—quite as serious and perplexing as our own, and to discover that, even in that remote age, it was not necessary to be a mere traditionalist in order to be a sincere Christian. The revolt of the human mind which underlay the Renaissance of a thousand years later might not have been necessary if Augustine's freedom of thought had marked the minds of the Churchmen of a later age, such as Hildebrand. His passion for reality, not merely for formal or logical consistency, governed not only his modes of thought, but, inasmuch as they, too, were vital, his whole life-work and life-experience. There was nothing "ready-made" about that life-work. It is opportunist, spontaneous, and springing out of the need of the moment.³ "His theories are but his interpreted experiences." His problems are problems that belong to his whole being, and cannot be treated in compartments. He feels, and confesses, like some modern, the influence of psychology. He admits the limitation of the written word. There is a stage in spiritual experience, he declares, in which we pass beyond Scripture.

It is because of this that all attempts to claim him as the Father of special Schools of Thought in the Church, or the Author of Mediæval Church developments, such as we find in the Papacy or the Holy Roman Empire, are doomed to failure, whilst in that very

¹ But cp. *The Making of the Western Mind*, p. 191.

² Cunningham's *St. Austin*, p. 10.

³ Workman's *Christian Thought to the Reformation*, p. 114.

failure we find the secret of his continued usefulness. When we try to write down briefly his contribution to history, we seem to be writing contradictions. He has been described as the parent of the Schoolmen, and the Calvinist, of extreme Protestantism, extreme Sacramentalism, extreme Sacerdotalism. To him we owe the theory of the Invisible Church, which the Reformers were afterwards to develop, yet to him we also really owe the magnificent conception of the Holy Roman Empire, with the world-claims of the Papacy which Hildebrand fought for, and by which it was ultimately overthrown. In fact almost every "School of Thought" in the Church till modern times has claimed Augustine as its founder or interpreter.¹ In him lay the seed out of which the Roman Church as we know it to-day has grown, yet in him also is to be found the spring and strength of later mystical movements. The great types of Western Philosophic Thought declare him their fountain-head, yet he is equally, as his *Confessions* reveal, the missionary of vital, spiritual religion. And, if it is historically true to speak of him as Augustine the traditionalist, Augustine the Neoplatonist, Augustine the Catholic Churchman in a Cyprianic sense, yet it is equally correct to associate him with the type of religion we style "evangelical." For it was Augustine who sowed the seed of the Reformation, and "the Reformation inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of his doctrine of grace over his doctrine of the Church." "There is hardly a topic," it has been said,² "in the whole range of theology and philosophy on which he has not something to say."

His knowledge of Christ is inwoven with his knowledge of the Teachers of the old world. One might almost say that Plato the Greek and Cicero the Latin were his schoolmasters to bring him to Christ. For the "Hortensius" turned his desires Christward, and the philosophy of Plato revealed in its very limitations the need for a richer and fuller revelation. It marked the difference, as he himself says,³ "between those who saw whither they were to go, yet saw not the way . . . the way which leadeth not only to behold but to inhabit the blessed country." "The Greek philosophers showed the temple of the true God; but the Redeemer alone could bring him into it."⁴ So, as his insight into God's nature grew in clearness and depth and intensity, the cold radiance of Platonism withdrew, and the very passion and devotion of the *Confessions* bear witness to it.

In all this strange diversity of experience he is God's special gift not only to an age confused then with conflicting impressions and influences, partly heathen, partly Christian, but to an age like the present, when systems of Thought and Society and Religion are running riot in their conflict of change, and leaving minds uprooted, unsettled, thirsting once again for the reconciliation of what is strange and diverse with what is old and proven as satisfying.⁵ "He still towers as a master of Christian thought above all who

¹ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Art. "Augustine."

² Cunningham, *St. Austin*, p. 13.

³ *Confessions*, Book VII, s. 26.

⁴ Hatzfeld's *St. Augustine*, p. 43.

⁵ Cunningham, p. 36.

have followed him in Western Christendom. He stands alone—a central Figure—the last spokesman of the wisdom of the Ancient World, the first who discussed the characteristic problems of modern times. It is just because he thus stands midway between the old and the new that it is profitable, that it is possible, to compare his doctrines with those of the men of all other ages." He can warn us as to the nature of evil, for he sounded it to its depths before his conversion. He can help us to gain spiritual freedom, for his own earlier career was one long struggle to win it. He can expound the reality of God's Sovereignty, for he has traced it for us in every stage of his own personal life. He can guard us against the fascinations of new heresies, for he felt them to the full in Manichæanism, with its exaltation of reason above faith and inner consciousness above external authority.

II

The local backgrounds of Augustine's life made an all-important contribution towards his mission. He was born in the little African free-town of Thagaste, the home of Alypius, his dearest friend, and the half-way mart-house between wooded Numidia and the sandy sun-splashed steppes of the southern mountains. Then, later, he became a schoolboy at Madaura, the old Numidian city on its open, shadowless table-land, where first he learnt what he calls "the fugitive beauties and delusive charm of a world of sense." Then he was flung, at a receptive age, into heathen Carthage—the Carthage of Venus, with its azure skies and shimmering seas, its glittering lagoons and twin-harbours crowded with sails, its towering Capitol crowned with heathen temples, its sensual atmosphere and its seductive offer, especially to the young, of the mixed goblet of Roman life. Archbishop Benson has painted it in his *Life of Cyprian*, and what Cyprian found it, that Augustine must have proved it too. For Cyprian's "challenge to the world's Creeds," in his first Thesis, "That Idols are no gods," and his "challenge to the world's life" in the *Tusculan Oration* to Donatus, his brother-rhetorician, are no whit more searching in their exposure of its falsity than are the *Confessions* and the *City of God*. "What gold, what silver, what raiment," Augustine exclaims of Cyprian, "he brought with him out of Egypt!" But Augustine brought more, for "above all the spoil he brought from without, he brought with it himself,"¹ a personality which could so appropriate its impressions as to pass them on to ages long after Rome had fallen. The *City of God* was born, not only out of the overthrow of Rome, but out of that sense of imperial heritage and imperial splendour which first dawned upon him in Carthage.

Then followed, in spite of Monica's prayers, the flight to Rome itself, still the throbbing hub of the world, and the busy, many-sided career of a professor of rhetoric there. And then—last halting place before he found his rest in Christ, and final field of activity by sea-washed Hippo,—the life in Milan as a state-professor, with its clash

¹ *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, Art. "Augustine."

of conflicting influences, Christian under Ambrose and Manichæan, till the great decision came.

Out of all this helpfulness of a diversified and parallel experience, can we gather any special message? Above the multiplicity of his writings tower two great works which contain in themselves the heart of that life-message. Neither of them is a scholar's book—their intellectual inadequacy and diffusiveness sufficiently prove that. The first—the *Confessions*—is the story of a QUEST. The second—*The City of God*—is the drama of a CONFLICT. In the first he unfolds the secrets and motives of his life. It has been compared to the *Imitatio Christi* or the *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is Augustine's "Apologia pro sua vitâ"—his Psalm *De Profundis* and *Non Nobis*. And the Quest it records is twofold—the quest of his soul for God and the quest of God for his soul. The *Confessions* are no breathings of a subjective idealism; they are the utterly truthful record of an actual experience which finds its echo in our own lives. All around the pilgrim are "the sights that dazzle," the "tempting sounds" he hears, and the ever-present snare of the world with its manifold, appealing charm. "I bore a shattered and a bleeding soul, and where to repose it I found not. Not in calm groves, not in games and music, not in fragrant spots nor in curious banquetings, nor in the pleasures of the bed or of the couch; nor, finally, in books of poesy found it repose." "For whither," he asks, "should my heart flee from my heart? Whither should I flee from myself?"

There is the quest on his side—so drawn aside by false lights, and the self-will of one who "loved to choose and see his way," and treat it as God's. "It was my sin that not in Him but in His creatures I sought for pleasures, sublimities, truths, and so fell headlong into sorrows, confusions, errors." "I was grown deaf by the clanking of the chain of my mortality, the punishment of the pride of my soul." "To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves." "For within me there was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God." Yet the burning desire is always there, however concealed or even buried. "Hide not Thy face from me. Let me die, lest I die—only let me see Thy face!" Intellectual delights brought no real solace:—"fictions of my misery, not the realities of Thy blessedness."

And there is the quest of God, so patient, so persistent, so triumphant in result,—the continuous answer to Monica's prayers, the ever-present consciousness of God which forbid all satisfaction that fell short of Him:—"O Lord, Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee." "Thy hands, O my God, in the secret purpose of Thy providence, did not forsake my soul." "This, Thy whole gift, was to will what I willed, and to will what Thou willedst." So that the finding when it came, was due, not to man's willing but to God's following. The chief value of Augustine's views of sin, of freedom, of baptismal grace, of predestination and election, lies in their being the record of a personal experience. For here the seeming antinomies of thought are reconciled. He not so much found Christ, as, like Saul of Tarsus, was found of Him, and

the Confessions are the story of a Discovery, of a Goal finally won.

In the other book—*The City of God*—you have the natural sequel—the Conflict of faith by which the gift won is kept. It is the application of this discovery of God to the wider field of all human relationships. One must not regard it as a philosophy of history; it is the story of an inevitable conflict between Christianity and Paganism. The Conflict is with us still. It varies from age to age, as the character of the Paganism varies, but it is always present. "Love not the world" is the inevitable outcome of the command to love God. Two cities are, in each new age, making their rival appeals for the souls of men—the *Urbs terrena*,¹ whose origin is self-love in contempt of God, and the City of God, whose origin is contempt of self in love of God. The world is ever before us, an entity of delight and attraction that offers itself as complete without God. Like Muhammed outside Damascus, the Christian makes his choice, "There is only one Paradise for the souls of men, and mine is elsewhere."

Everything about Augustine—his African nature, his home training, his historic position, his social and intellectual gifts—made the conflict a real one. The appeal of love and beauty came home with all the more force to him, standing as he did at the parting of the ways. Dr. Figgis speaks of his life as passed in a series of changes like those which divide the Jubilees of Queen Victoria from the silver wedding of her grandson.² The "old order was changing, giving place to new." Augustine was the product, the exponent, the vanquisher, of an expiring Paganism. He, least of all men, scorned the power of the foe with which he had to strive, for to the last, he knew its power within his own soul. The most complete and most convincing, of any soul-history, is contained in him. The problem of the City of God is fundamental, nor has it ever been finally resolved. It is a conflict not primarily between two polities. That is only to externalize it. Rather, the conflict is between two religions, and this is an age-long problem. This is Augustine's primary and predominating thought. It never leaves him. These two religions are conceived as the binding force of two societies, the expression of two opposing passions, the passion for God and the passion for self.³ "If we seek to understand him by the outcome to which his system led in history, we shall do wrong. Rather, we must seek to understand that by the deeper antagonism between the other-worldly and the this-worldly influence of all institutions." In Augustine, there were struggling two men, like Esau and Jacob in the womb of Rebekah. There was Augustine of Thagaste, of Madaura, of Carthage, of Rome, of Milan, the brilliant boy, the splendid and expansive youthful leader, "skilled in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," possessed of the antique culture, rhetorical, dialectic, Roman—the man of the world, the developed humanist, with enough tincture of Platonism to gild the humanism; and there was the Augustine of the *Confessions*, of the *Sermons*, of the *De*

¹ Hatzfeld, *St. Augustine*.

² Figgis, *Augustine's City of God*, p. 24.

³ Figgis, pp. 114-5.

Civitate, the monk, the ascetic, the other-worldly preacher, the Biblical expositor, the mortified priest. "These two beings struggle within him, the natural man filled with the sense of beauty and the joy of living, expansive, passionate, artful—and the super-natural Christian, fleeing from the world, shunning it, burning what he adored, and adoring what he burnt, celibate and (at times) almost anti-social." "The book"—yes for that matter, the life—"is too great to be consistent. We can mark in it the traces of a never-ceasing conflict."

It is the same with ourselves to-day. On the one hand is the world, the course of life, the present, the immediate "nice things," and on the other, the eternal, the far-off, the spiritual city, the altar of sacrifice, the chalice of suffering—each calls us, each finds response in our nature. How can the problem be resolved? One way is by complete world-flight, the extreme asceticism, that is asceticism not as discipline but as self-annihilation. On the other is the Pagan solution, frankly materialistic, but ruling out as irrelevant all interests that look beyond. Have we yet discovered any third alternative? Is the reconciliation of all beauty, truth, joy, fellowship, *as the world offers them to us*, compatible with love to God as our foremost motive and principle in life? On the one hand, "the City of beautiful nonsense," the Vanity Fair of the "sights that dazzle" around us, the "dear city of Cecrops," the passing, perishing Rome of our desires; or the desert with peace, "the nostalgia of the infinite which finds its goal in the Eternal," the *Urbs beata* of the child of God, with its reality of present joy and blessing here and the blissful vision and enjoyment of God hereafter. It was not without realized cause that Augustine had the Penitential Psalms hung up before him, where he could easily read them, as he lay dying.

The recent numbers of *The Expository Times* maintain the usefulness which this interesting monthly has had for so long in keeping theological students in touch with current books and the latest thoughts. There are always some interesting problems under discussion, and valuable light is thrown on difficult passages of Scripture. The only criticism we might venture to make is that the notices of books are on occasions almost too favourable, and the generous spirit of the reviewers leads them to ignore partial and sometimes inadequate if not misleading statements.

The Bishop of Manchester edits *The Pilgrim* with the ability which we naturally expect of him. He has an able and diversified body of contributors whose views at times might be difficult to harmonize. Social questions are well in evidence. In the October number Mr. J. W. Hunkin has an article on "The Doctrine of the Atonement in the Primitive Church," which deserves attention as a study of the Acts and the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians.