

# ROME, AUGUST 24, 410, AND NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: AUGUSTINE AND THE END OF THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

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The city which has captured the whole world is itself taken captive.... Who would believe that Rome, built up by the conquest of the whole world, has collapsed, that the mother of nations has also become their tomb?... When the brightest light on the whole earth was extinguished, when the Roman Empire was deprived of its head and when, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city, then 'I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good, and my sorrow was stirred' (Ps. 39:2).... The world sinks into ruin.... The renowned city, the capital of the Roman Empire, is swallowed up in one tremendous fire; and there is no part of the earth where Romans are not in exile.<sup>2</sup>

Such were the reactions of one of the most learned Christians of the day, Jerome, away in the East in Bethlehem, to the capture and sack of Rome by the Goths under Alaric on August 24, 410. This irascible Christian scholar was given to intemperateness, and his alarmist horror was not paralleled in Augustine, but his sense of deep shock was not unrepresentative of widespread dread at the news of Rome's fall. The best-known refugee from the city, Pelagius no less, commented thus:

It happened only recently, and you heard it yourself. Rome, the mistress of the world, shivered, crushed with fear, at the sound of the blaring trumpets and the howling of the Goths.... Everyone was mingled

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<sup>1</sup> This was the first of a series entitled 'Augustine's Tale of Two Cities', delivered as the Josephine So Memorial Lectures in the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, in January 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, *Epistle* 127:12; *Commentary on Ezekiel* 3, pref., 1, pref.; *Epistle* 128:4. Cf. *Epistle* 126:2, 'I was so confounded by the havoc wrought in the West and above all by the sack of Rome that, as the common saying has it, I forgot even my own name. Long did I remain silent, knowing that it was a time to weep.'

together and shaken with fear; every household had its grief and an all-pervading terror gripped us. Slave and noble were one. The same spectre of death stalked before us all.<sup>3</sup>

Such reactions came readily to mind in the wake of '9/11' – the destruction wrought by terrorists in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, and the apocalyptic end-of-the-world dread which it evoked. For millions watching events live on TV it was a heart-stopping never-to-be-forgotten catastrophe. The American dating '9/11' has itself become an immediately recognizable symbol of unimaginable calamity challenging a nation's (or a world's) self-understanding. So the Moscow theatre seizure and its tragic outcome was 'Russia's 9/11', and more plausibly the terrorist bombing of Bali hotspots was 'Australia's 9/11' – and in the latter the involvement of Hong Kong people is not forgotten.

The end of the world? Or simply a day that changed the world? – which would be grave enough. The interest of this lecture lies not in an analysis of the bombing of the Twin Towers and the aftermath, but to a lesser extent in parallels with the sack of Rome in 410 and mainly in Augustine's reflections, both more immediate and longer-term, on the fate of Rome. These are presented in the hope that they may help Christian people early in the third millennium reflect Christianly about outrages such as 9/11. For whereas the whole world was very soon an expert on 9/11 – such was the extraordinary effect of mass communication on a global scale – Augustine is our only extended commentator on Rome's misfortunes. Compared with our wall-to-wall unending exposure to the horrors of 9/11, even to excess, not much detailed reportage of the sack of Rome has survived, with hardly any first-hand eye-witness. In one of his sermons after Rome's fall Augustine discloses that the congregation at Carthage had already had more than enough: 'Oh, if only he would shut up about Rome!'<sup>4</sup>

There were other differences too. The assault on New York and Washington was totally unexpected, and the shock was intensified by its unimaginable daring. Rome, by contrast, saw its downfall coming. August 24, 410, was Alaric's third siege of the city, and he was not the first Gothic commander to threaten it early in the fifth century. The loss of life and damage to the capital were not massive. The occupation lasted only three days, and the Goths respected the churches, being themselves Arian

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<sup>3</sup> Pelagius, *Epistle to Demetrias* 30, tr. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 2000), p. 287.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 105:12.

Christians. Later barbarian attacks on Rome during the century would also take place within agreed terms, limiting the carnage and pillage.

Yet one important similarity may validate a comparison – the almost inviolable stature of the two cities, Rome and New York, as citadels of world-wide domination. The terrorists targeted, in Washington also, the iconic centres of America's political, military and commercial supremacy as unchallenged sole world power. American soil had never – has never – been invaded by enemy forces. Rome, the eternal city, had never previously been captured – and certainly never by rude 'barbarians'! Even though the shaking of the foundations of the Western half of the Roman Empire had long been felt, Rome continued to attract boundless confidence and pride. Listen to the rhapsody of Rome's immortal greatness by the pagan poet Rutilius, writing in 417:

Hear me, Rome, queen of the world and brightest jewel  
in the vault of Heaven. Hear me, mother  
of men and the gods: your temples bring Heaven near;  
we chant your praise as long as we have breath.  
No man will ever be safe if he forgets you;  
may I praise you still when the sun is dark.  
Your power is felt wherever the sun's light shines,  
even to the farthest edge of the world.  
The sun god revolves only for you, his horses  
that rise from your soil sink down to your soil.  
The parching death of Africa has not stopped you;  
the stiffening cold of the north made way for you.  
The earth has opened a path for you; wherever  
there are living things, there are you also.  
You have united the distant nations; under  
you, captivity has become profit.  
Men who have never known justice have been conquered  
and then been given rights under your laws;  
what was only a world you have made a city.

The stars, which know all that has been, have never seen  
a more beautiful Empire: Assyria  
attempted but failed to unite the world; Persia  
conquered only her neighbours; the empire  
of Alexander was torn apart by endless  
wars and rivalries. Rome was not larger  
at her birth, rather she had wisdom and judgement.  
War and peace alike were prudently used  
to enhance a position that never weakened.

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Rome deserved to prevail but that she has prevailed to this extent is a mark of her strength, rather than a mark of her destiny.

To count up the glories of Rome is like counting the stars in the sky:...

Let your law extend to all the known world;  
it will not die. You have lived a millennium  
plus sixteen decades and now nine more years.  
You need not fear the furies; the years that remain  
have no limit but the earth's firmness and  
the strength of Heaven supporting the stars.<sup>5</sup>

Nor were such sentiments restricted to non-Christians, as our opening quotations from Jerome partly illustrated. From a Christian pen such effusions are nowhere more eloquent than in the long poem of Prudentius (d. after 405), *Against Symmachus*.

Shall I tell you, Roman, what cause it was that so exalted your labours, what it was that nursed your glory to such a height of fame that it has put rein and bridle on the world? God, wishing to bring into partnership peoples of different speech and realms of discordant manners, determined that all the civilised world should be harnessed to one ruling power and bear gentle bonds in harmony under the yoke, so that love of their religion should hold men's hearts in union; for no bond is made that is worthy of Christ unless unity of spirit leagues together the nations it associates. Only concord knows God; it alone worships the beneficent Father aright in peace....

God taught the nations everywhere to bow their heads under the same laws and become Romans – all whom Rhine and Danube flood, ... those who are nurtured by Ganges or washed by the warm Nile's seven mouths. A common law made them equals and bound them by a single name, bringing the conquered into bonds of brotherhood.

Such is the result of the great successes and triumphs of the Roman power. For the time of Christ's coming, be assured, was the way prepared which the general good will of peace among us had just built under the rule of Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> Rutilius, *Concerning his Return* 1:45-65, 83-97, 134-8, tr. Harold Isbell, *The Last Poets of Imperial Rome* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 222-5.

Come then, Almighty; here is a world in harmony; enter it. An earth receives you now, O Christ, which peace and Rome hold in a bond of union. These you command to be the heads and highest powers of the world. Rome without peace finds no favour with you; and it is the supremacy of Rome, keeping down disorders here or there by the awe of her sovereignty, that secures the peace, so that you have pleasure in it.<sup>6</sup>

Writing years before the sack of 410, Prudentius exemplifies the dimensions of the task facing Augustine the apologist in the wake of the plundering of eternal Rome: how could this have possibly happened to Rome, the capital of the world, to Christian Rome, which housed the bodies of the apostles Peter and Paul and the relics of other martyrs and boasted so many church buildings? How could such a disaster have come to pass in 'Christian times (*tempora Christiana*)' – a phrase used by Augustine and other writers to refer to the Christian Roman Empire, the era since Constantine when ancient prophecies had been fulfilled and kings had bowed down to serve Christ?<sup>7</sup> Augustine's sermons addressed questioners appalled that Rome should have fallen, aghast that 'It's Christian times, and Rome is destroyed.... Why is Rome falling amid the sacrifices of the Christians?'<sup>8</sup> As Peter Brown has written,

Rome was the symbol of a whole civilization; it was as if an army had been allowed to sack Westminster Abbey or the Louvre. In Rome, the protection of the gods for the Empire had been made explicit. For the conservatives of the previous century, Rome had been a sort of 'pagan Vatican'; a punctiliously protected city of great temples where the religion that had guaranteed the greatness of the Empire could survive and be seen to survive. The Christians had even colluded with this myth: just as Rome had assembled the gods of all nations to act as talismans, so Roman Christians had come to believe that Peter and Paul had travelled from the East to lay their holy bodies in the city. The one

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<sup>6</sup> Prudentius, *Against Symmachus* II: 583-94, 602-4, 606-9, 619-22, 634-40, tr. H. J. Thomson, *Prudentius*, 2 vols (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA, 1949-53), II, pp. 52-7. For similar sentiments cf. Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* II: 413-40, a prayer put in the mouth of the dying martyr Lawrence: 'O Christ, ... who set the sceptre of the world, on Rome's high citadel, ordaining that the world...' (Thomson, II, pp. 132-5).

<sup>7</sup> See the important work by R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970), ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 81:9.

talisman had merely replaced the other; and, after 410, Augustine had to deal with disillusioned Christians quite as much as with angry pagans.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine reminds us in his *Reconsiderations (Retractationes, 426/7)* that it was to counter pagan blasphemies attributing Rome's destruction to Christianity that he set about writing the *City of God*. These allegations, which we learn of from Augustine's sermons and letters in the interval before the first books of the *City of God* were compiled, voiced again centuries-old accusations to which Christian apologists had been responding since Justin Martyr and earlier. In essence these attacks claimed that Christianity caused misfortunes like the Gothic sack by robbing Rome's traditional gods and goddesses of their honour in sacrifices and other customary rites and ceremonies. As a consequence the deities had failed to prosper and safeguard Rome and its empire. Christianity also promoted useless ethics such as pacifism, ill-suited to secure imperial sway. So Augustine devoted the first five books of the *City of God* to refuting the belief that the gods were to be worshipped to gain the good things of this life, and the next five to opposing a similar opinion concerning the future life.

In fact, books 1-10 (out of 22 in all) contain much that is of far wider interest than answering these tired allegations. The *City of God* encompasses many digressions and excursions, which contribute to its length (over a thousand pages in recent English translations) as well as making it a frustrating and baffling book for the reader. For the purposes of this lecture I want to focus on a broad thread of argument which has in view not so much pagan objectors as Christian ones, or at least Christians bemused, disturbed, perplexed by what has befallen Christian Rome and Christians in Rome in particular. It is surely in this territory that we are most likely to discern perspectives to assist Christians today who try to understand 9/11 or similar calamities within a faith in God's providential purposes. For Christian preachers and teachers to fail to make such an effort is to connive in a Christian mind-set that has nothing to say about wide areas of human experience, and so abets a *de facto* deist attitude towards the world. No claim is being advanced here that we can simply read off from the pages of Augustine's *magnum opus* ready-made interpretations of such events, but at least Augustine may be a helpful tutor, pointing us to elements of a Christian evaluation of our world's history and of humanity's tragedies within it.

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, *Augustine*, p. 287.

Let me summarize at this point the threefold nub of Augustine's argument, which may not be immediately glimpsed from a reading of the vast and rambling *City of God*. Augustine plays down the seriousness of the sack of Rome, and in the second place also the special significance of Rome in terms of both secular and Christian history, and thirdly all of humanity's earthly existence. So he first cuts the disaster down to size, secondly desacralizes or demythologizes the fortunes of Rome and its Empire, and finally minimizes the value of all life in this transient world by comparison with the life of the world to come. On all three fronts he instructs Christians as much as, even more than, he rebuts the charges of pagans.

First, then, Augustine sets the capture and pillage of the city in sober proportions. It was the third time that Rome had been burnt in its history. 'The city that was recently on fire amid the sacrifices of Christians had already been twice on fire amid the sacrifices of pagans.... So why do you like growling against God for a city that has been in the habit of being on fire?'<sup>10</sup> In perhaps his earliest comment on the sack, a sermon *On the Fall of the City of Rome*, Augustine insists that Rome had not been destroyed as Sodom was destroyed, that is, root and branch so that neither human being nor animal was left alive. This rejoinder countered the complaint why God failed to spare Rome, in which there were surely great numbers of righteous souls: 'in such a great number of chaste men and women dedicated to God, in such a great number of servants and handmaids of God',<sup>11</sup> it cannot have been impossible to find the requisite number of righteous persons. But Augustine rejects the parallel with Genesis 18; the two cases are not commensurate.

By contrast with the extermination of Sodom ('Behold how God destroyed a city' – if you really want to talk in these terms), God spared Rome.

From the city of Rome how many have gone forth and will return, how many have remained and have escaped, how many in the holy places could not even be touched [because of the Gothic respect of asylum].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 296:9.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *De Excidio Urbis Romae Sermo* 2:2, ed. and tr. M. V. O'Reilly (Washington DC, 1955), p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

If you want to assess the role of the righteous in the city, there were indeed many such at Rome 'and because of these God spared the city and many escaped'.<sup>13</sup>

And 'even those who died God spared'.<sup>14</sup> At this point modern-day Christians have to struggle to remain on Augustine's wave-length.

Having died in a good life and in true righteousness and faith, were they not freed from the vicissitudes of human misfortune and have they not entered upon divine refreshment?<sup>15</sup>

Would that we were able to see with our eyes the souls of the righteous who died in that war! Then you would see how God spared the city. For thousands of saints are at rest, rejoicing and saying to God: 'Thanks be to you, O Lord, because you have rescued us from the troubles and hurtful torments of the flesh. Thanks to you because we now fear neither barbarians nor the devil, we do not fear hunger on earth, we do not fear the enemy, we do not fear the persecutor, we do not fear the oppressor. We died on earth, never in your sight to die, O God, and this by your gift, not by our merits.'<sup>16</sup>

Among those who died in the USA on September 11, 2001, were a number of Christian believers, whose nearest and dearest were no doubt able amid their grief to affirm something of what Augustine here affirms. But they are unlikely to have expressed it in his terms, of God 'sparing' even those who died at hostile hands, their lives cut off in mid-stream. Augustine's account of their 'dying never to die in God's sight' resonates recognizably with part of the biblical perspective on the death of the righteous, and with this Christians today will readily concur. But can the same be said of Augustine's intense sense of the inferiority of this earthly life and its ever-present tribulations? This is an important question because it touches on a fundamental theme – assumption, almost – of the *City of God*.

The sermon *On the Fall of the City of Rome* starts by depicting the kinds of people, signified by the three figures of Noah, Daniel and Job, whom God will deliver from 'the great tribulation to come on the human

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 5:5, O'Reilly, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 6:6, O'Reilly, p. 67.



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race', and it ends with 1 Corinthians 10:13, the faithful God who will not allow his followers to be tested (*tentari*) beyond their endurance.<sup>17</sup>

In between, the preacher's message is one of the sufferings of just and unjust alike in their earthly course:

People are surprised... when God corrects the human race and rouses it by scourges of holy chastisement, when he imposes discipline before the judgement, and often does not choose whom he will scourge, since he does not wish to seek out whom he will condemn.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine continues almost as though the sermon were a dialogue, responding to Christians voicing their pain and distress. 'Many were carried off as prisoners' from plundered Rome – but so was Daniel, not for his own punishment but to comfort others. 'Many were killed' – but so were many just prophets 'from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zacharias', and so too many apostles, and even Jesus himself. 'But many were afflicted with various tortures': can we imagine anyone as tortured as Job?<sup>19</sup>

Augustine breaks off this relentless sequence of *ad hominem* responses, which soothe with cold comfort administered with sharp Christian reasoning.

Dreadful things have been reported to us: destruction, fires, acts of plunder, killings, tortures. It is true, we have heard many terrible things, we have groaned over everything, we have wept often, we've found it hard to be consoled. I do not refuse to believe, I do not deny that we have heard many terrible things, that many outrages were committed in that city.<sup>20</sup>

'Nevertheless...' – and Augustine resumes his reflection on the travails of Job, leading to 'If we have received good things at the hand of the Lord, why should we not receive evil?' (Job 2:10). Is God not our Father 'both when he promises life and when he inflicts punishment?' The surgical knife of the preacher probes more deeply:

Think of whatever torments you will, let your mind imagine whatever human punishments it may, compare these with hell, and all that you suffer is trivial. Here tormenter and victim are temporal, there they are

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 1, 9:8, O'Reilly, pp. 53, 75.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 2:1, O'Reilly, p. 55 (altered).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 2:2, O'Reilly, pp. 57-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 3:3, O'Reilly, p. 61.

eternal. Do those people still suffer who suffered at the time that Rome was pillaged? But the rich man suffers still in hell.<sup>21</sup>

When writing or preaching about the sack of Rome, Augustine invariably gets on to the afflictions and 'pressures' (*pressurae*; the image is that of the olive press) of this present life. In another sermon, 'The world is devastated, the press is trodden.'

Come now, Christians... strangers on earth who seek a city in heaven, ... understand that you have come here simply in order to take your departure. You are passing through the world.... Don't let lovers of the world disturb you....

These troubles and pressures are not scandals. Be righteous, and they will be training exercises. Trouble comes; it will be whichever you wish, your education or your condemnation. Which it will be will depend on what sort of thing it finds you to be – gold, or straw?<sup>22</sup>

So Christians must have an answer ready for the pagan – or, much worse, the bad Christian – who seeks to scandalize you by saying 'Look at all the terrible things happening in Christian times.' The answer is 'Even before this happened Christ foretold me.' The capture and plunder of Rome, which sent a shock-wave of horror rippling round the Mediterranean world, is reduced to the category of the predicted and hence to-be-expected.<sup>23</sup>

If you wake up from sleep,

Christ immediately starts talking to you. Why are you upset? I told you about all this long ago. The reason I foretold it was so that, when bad times came, you could hope for good times, and not go to pieces.... Are you astonished at the world going to pieces? You might as well be astonished that the world has grown old. The world's like a man: he's born, grows up, grows old. Old age is full of complaints: coughing, phlegm, bleary eyes, aches and pains, weariness, it's all there.... The world has grown old; it's full of troubles and pressures....

Don't be eager to cling to an aged world, and unwilling to grow young in Christ, who says to you, 'The world is perishing, the world is aging,

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 4:4, O'Reilly, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Sermon* 81:7, tr. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons III/3* (New York, 1991), pp. 363-4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Hill, p. 364.

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the world is going to pieces....' Don't be afraid, 'your youth shall be renewed like the eagle's' (Psalm 103:5).<sup>24</sup>

Cast in the image of the threshing-floor or the goldsmith's furnace,

Rome also has endured a single tribulation, in which the godly person has either been freed or been corrected.... Let not the hardship of the godly disturb us; it is a form of trial. Unless perhaps we shudder when we see any just person endure harsh and heavy affliction on this earth, and forget what the Most Just and the Most Holy has endured. What the whole city suffered, One alone suffered. See who that One is, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who was seized, bound, scourged, heaped with every insult, suspended and crucified on a cross, and put to death. Weigh Rome in the balance with Christ, weigh the whole earth with Christ, weigh heaven and earth with Christ: nothing created counterbalances the Creator.... Let us therefore bear what God wishes us to bear. He who to cure and heal us sent his Son, knows, as a physician knows, what utility there is even in pain.<sup>25</sup>

Augustine here touches depths rarely glimpsed in his reflections on Rome's fall and human responses to it. Yet even here he is not truly profound, for he links Christ's crucifixion with devastated Rome chiefly in the form of a comparison, in an *a fortiori* argument. There may be a hint of a more searching note at the end of the quotation – the God who sent his Son to cure us, knowing, as only a doctor does, the usefulness of pain. Does God experience the pain of slaughtered or tortured Romans, of the thousands incinerated on 9/11, because of the incomparable sufferings of Christ? At best Augustine throws out a line of suggestive reflection for others to follow up.

I earlier set out three strands in Augustine's cutting down to size an event that others, believers as well as unbelievers, visualized in colossal apocalyptic colours. The Goths had long been discerned by Christians as foreshadowed by Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39 (cf. Revelation 20:8). Hence some of Jerome's baleful laments on the fate of Rome are found in his commentary on Ezekiel. Augustine will have none of it. We might even say that he reduces the ominous weight of the calamity by routinizing it, by making it but a typical, and entirely predictable, aspect of human life in a world grown old and falling to pieces. By dealing at length with the first of the three strands we have already said much about the third strand –

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<sup>24</sup> *Sermon* 81:8, Hill, pp. 364-5.

<sup>25</sup> *De Excidio...* *Sermo* 8:9, O'Reilly, p. 73.

Augustine's disparagement of this vale of human woe by contrast with the heavenly bliss to come. Recall that simple sentence from his sermon, 'Understand that you have come here simply in order to take your departure.' For this world-denying otherworldliness Augustine wins no friends in the liberal broad-church religion of much twenty-first-century Christianity in the West. (I strongly suspect that the story will be different in other more vigorous regions of world Christianity.) Yet it must be stressed again, that Augustine's faith is most profoundly imbued with this sense of the imperfection and impermanence of all human life on earth, even life lived in Christ. This is obvious enough from an investigation of what he says in the *City of God* about 'the heavenly city', as he often calls the city of God.<sup>26</sup>

The second strand in Augustine's reductionist exercise is the desacralizing of the history of Rome itself. Only a brief summary can be given here of how he accomplishes this in the *City of God*.<sup>27</sup> Rome appears as but one of a series of mighty empires, whose path to success has been no more honourable than that of the others. Augustine grants privileged status not even to the Christian period of Rome's empire from Constantine onwards. It receives surprisingly short treatment in the *City of God*. The blessedness of Christian emperors is placed not in their military or political successes or the length of their reign, but in their humility, humaneness and service of true religion. The greatest of them according to Augustine, Theodosius I, 'was more glad to be a member of the church than ruler of the world' (*City of God* 5:26). Augustine needed to explain why God had granted Rome such a great empire, and he found the answer in God's rewarding Rome for the single-minded pursuit of glory, in which it afforded an example of dedication and sacrifice even to citizens of the pilgrim city of God. But Augustine does not lose sight of his controlling theme: that was the limit of Rome's reward. He quoted the Gospel with gentle irony, 'They have received their reward in full.'<sup>28</sup> Nor did Rome's achievement imply that it had acted justly. On Augustine's analysis, even by the definition given by Cicero, Rome had not been a 'republic', for pagan Rome could not satisfy the terms of 'an association of people united by a common sense of right', since where God was not given his due, there could be no true justice. A lesser definition, of those 'united by a common agreement on the objects of their love', would have to serve for Rome.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This was done in the second of my Josephine So lectures in Hong Kong.

<sup>27</sup> This was a major theme in the fourth lecture of the series.

<sup>28</sup> *City of God* 5:15, citing Matt. 6:2.

<sup>29</sup> *City of God* 19:21, 24.

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Augustine could have entertained no notion of the invincibility, the inviolability, of Rome. Yet, for reasons that will now be obvious, nor did he read the 410 sack as the beginning of the end for the Roman Empire. In Book 4 of the *City of God*, written perhaps in 415, Augustine could comment as follows:

The Roman Empire has been shaken rather than transformed, and that happened to it at other periods, before the preaching of Christ's name; and it recovered. There is no need to despair of its recovery at this present time. Who knows what is God's will in this matter?<sup>30</sup>

It had not been the final catastrophe, but now, with only a few years' hindsight, just another disruption in the ebb and flow of the empire's history. Rutilius's glowing encomium of Rome's universal power and beneficence included exactly such a passage, recognizing Rome's periodic bouncing back after repulse or failure.<sup>31</sup> The Christian chronicler, Orosius, who compiled *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, struck an optimistic note c. 417:

Although the memory of this event is fresh, anyone who sees the numbers of the Romans themselves and listens to their talk will think that nothing had happened, as they themselves confess, unless perhaps he notices some ruins of the fire still remaining.<sup>32</sup>

Even in book 1 of the *City of God*, written in 413, Augustine had to rebuke the behaviour of refugees from Rome who had fled south to Africa:

When, by all accounts, nations in the East were bewailing your catastrophe, when the greatest cities in the farthest parts of the earth were keeping days of public grief and mourning, you were asking the way to the theatres, and going in, making full houses, in fact, behaving in a much more crazy fashion than before. It was just this corruption, this moral disease, this overthrow of all integrity and decency, that the great Scipio dreaded for you, when he stopped the building of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 4:7, tr. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Rutilius, *Concerning his Return* 1:119-33, tr. Isbell, p. 224 ('Fortune which is cruel today will be kind tomorrow').

<sup>32</sup> Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* 7:40.

theatres.... He did not think that a city is fortunate when its walls are standing, while its morals are in ruins.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever Augustine's expectations for Rome, in the event it would not recover its former glory and vigour. The Western half fell like other ancient empires that the ancient world had seen come and go. In 410 it was already tottering towards its death, for the Goths, more accurately the Visigoths, were but the first of successive waves of migrant peoples who would within a century or so of 410 submerge the former Roman provinces in a patchwork of new kingdoms. Among these barbarian migrations, as historians still call them, were the Vandals. Originally from Scandinavia, they moved south through the Iberian peninsula, across the straits of Gibraltar and then eastwards along the North African coast. They were besieging Hippo in 430 when Augustine died, and in 439 they captured Carthage. The Roman tenure of North Africa was at an end.

The Vandals were but one of a number of ethnic hordes on the move from the north and the east into the Western reaches of the Roman Empire. The line of emperors, weak, short-lived, ineffective, continued until 476, when sovereignty in the West was formally ceded to the Eastern emperor in Constantinople. In reality the Ostrogoths held sway in northern Italy. By 410, and even before 410, the form of the Roman world had begun to pass away. Augustine recognized this in general terms without envisaging an imminent demise for imperial Rome. The world had grown old, it was perishing, passing away, going to pieces.

Augustine tuned in instinctively to Paul's counsel to the Corinthian Christians:

The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none, ... those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep, those who use the things of the world, as if they were not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

Part of the message of August 24, 410, as surely also of September 11, 2001, is precisely the impermanence of the strongest and most successful of human institutions. Rome was not exempt from the vulnerability of all

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<sup>33</sup> *City of God* 1:33, Bettenson p. 44. Cf. *Sermon* 296:12, 'That's why Peter died and was laid to rest in Rome, is it, in order that not a stone of the theatre might fall? God is knocking the playthings of boys from the hands of ill-disciplined adults', tr. Hill, *Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons* III/8 (1994), p. 210.

cities in history, New York and Washington included. There is no doubt very much more to say about such large-scale human disasters, but if Augustine is our tutor, we shall carry at least this much away from his reflections on the sack of ancient Rome, to help us make Christian sense of every 9/11 of the twenty-first century.

The gifted editor of *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus, provided these reflections on the first anniversary of 9/11 from New York itself:

This morning, at the corner of Fourteenth Street and First Avenue, I turned around to look again at where the towers were. It was exactly a year ago, on a Tuesday morning of such beauty as inspires songs about autumn in New York, that on the way to say the nine o'clock Mass we saw the first plane strike, and then the billowing clouds of desolation appealing to the skies. A small crowd had gathered at the corner, looking up in the curiosity that preceded shock. 'There must be thousands of people in there,' I said. 'Pray for them.' Then I went in to the altar of God to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass, the sacrifice of the cross that anticipated, caught up, and mysteriously redeemed all the desolations of time....

There are usually about a hundred people at the nine o'clock; this morning there were several times that. The first lesson was St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7: 'For the form of this world is passing away.' The gospel reading was the beatitudes from Luke. 'Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.' There was in the congregation a palpable hunger, and there was weeping, and there was faith, in the painful awareness of a form of the world that had passed away.

I thought it jarring at first when an elderly priest said afterwards, 'They chose exactly the wrong time to try to take out the Church.' He was referring to this year's media storm over priestly scandals, believing, as he does, that it was mainly a scheme to destroy the Catholic Church, or at least to eliminate its public influence. I think he is wrong. The crisis was not and is not mainly about that. But he is right about the indomitable strength of the community gathered by the only hope that endures. 'For the form of this world is passing away.' 'Blessed are you who weep....' Such were my thoughts this morning as I turned back at Fourteenth and First to look once again at the bright sky where the towers used to be.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *First Things* 127 (Nov. 2002), p. 87.