

**AUGUSTINE AS A LUMINARY AMONG ECCLESIASTICAL TEACHERS:
REFLECTIONS ON POPE PIUS XI'S AD SALUTEM**

By

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Abstract

*On the twentieth day of April 1930, the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the year of the Fifteenth Centenary Anniversary of the Death of St Augustine, the ninth year of the Pontificate of Pius XI, joining his predecessors in the praise of Augustine, for his gift of the cognition of the divine and hoping that humanity may again attain the image of divine revelation through his cognition, issued the Apostolic Letter **Ad Salutem** in Saint Peter's Basilica Rome. This piece studies Pope Pius XI's ecclesiastical document, which begins by focussing on the rich perspectives of the Roman Pontiffs who had gone before him, in relation to Augustine. Taking this as a basis for reflection, this paper further discusses the chief end of human existence in Augustine, the Roman Pontif's perspective on the Church, the Trinity and divine grace.*

Keywords: Augustine, Ecclesiastical, Teachers, Pope Pius XI, *Ad Salutem*

Introduction

No one can be unaware of how thoroughly familiar with the doctrine of Saint Augustine where the Roman Pontiffs, during the ages that followed close upon his death and to the present time. This is based on the fact that he occupies a central place in the development of theology and the evolution of philosophical thought. During the transition from paganism to the new religion (Christianity), the weight of the conflict which pressed upon the souls of Christian believers is profoundly expressed in the person and writings of Augustine. In fact, to have understood the spirit in which Augustine wrote and resolved conflicts is to penetrate in a mysterious way the struggles of Origin, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Jerome among others. It is thus not surprising that on the twentieth day of April 1930, the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus

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Christ and the year of the Fifteenth Centenary Anniversary of the Death of St Augustine, the ninth year of the Pontificate of Pius XI, joining his predecessors in the praise of Augustine, for his gift of the cognition of the divine and hoping that humanity may again attain the image of divine revelation through his cognition, issued the Apostolic Letter **Ad Salutem** in Saint Peter's Basilica Rome. He described Augustine thus:

He was the light set upon the candlestick; he was the vanquisher of every heresy and a guide to eternal salvation for his contemporaries. What is more, he continued to teach and console Christians as age succeeded age. Nay, even in our time we owe it to him in large measure that among believers the truth of Faith maintains its luster, while love for God has not ceased to burn. Indeed, it is a matter of common knowledge that the writings of Augustine, by their exceptional sublimity and charm, cast a spell over many who are at variance with us or who seem utter strangers to the Faith. Hence it is, that since the current year brings in its course with happy auspices the fifteenth centennial anniversary of the death of this peerless Bishop and Doctor, Christians the world over are eager to hold his memory in honor and are preparing to give public proof of their admiration and devotion. It beseems us all today not merely to exult that by a miracle, so to speak, was once united to the Mystical Body of Christ a genius so great and lofty, that in the judgment of history his superior can hardly be found anywhere in any age, but rather to steep and nourish ourselves with his learning and copy the model of his holy life (no. 1).

Pope Pius XI in this document first studied the rich perspectives of the Roman Pontiffs who had gone before him, in relation to Augustine. Taking this as a basis for his reflection, he went on to discuss the chief end of human existence in Augustine, his perspective on the Church, the Trinity and divine grace.

The Roman Pontiffs on Augustine

A cursory glance at the historical development for the Church reveals that the praise of Augustine has never ceased to be proclaimed in the Church of God, even by the Roman Pontiffs. When Augustine was still alive Pope Innocent I greeted him as a beloved friend and extolled the letter which he had received from the Saint and from four Bishops, his friends: "A letter instinct with faith and staunch with all the vigor of the Catholic religion."¹ Shortly after the death of

¹ Innocent to Aurelius, Alypius, Augustine, Evodius, and Possidius Bishops: epist. 183, n. 1, among the Augustinian letters.

Augustine, Celestine I defends him against his opponents in the following noble words:

We have ever deemed Augustine a man to be remembered for his sanctity, because of his life and services in our communion, nor has rumor at any time darkened his name with the suspicion of evil. So great was his knowledge, as we recall, that he was always reckoned by my predecessors also among our foremost teachers. All alike, therefore, thought highly of him as a man held in affection and honor by all.²

Gelasius I hailed Jerome and Augustine as "luminaries among ecclesiastical teachers."³ Hormisdas wrote in answer to Bishop Possessor's request for direction; these weighty words: "What the Roman, that is, the Catholic Church follows and maintains touching free will and the grace of God, can be learned from the different works of blessed Augustine, those especially which he addressed to Hilary and Prosper, though the formal chapters are contained in the ecclesiastical records."⁴ A like testimony was uttered by John II, when in refutation of heretics he appealed to the works of Augustine: "Whose teaching," he said, "according to the enactments of my predecessors, the Roman Church follows and maintains."⁵

Saint Gregory, thinking as highly of Augustine as he thought humbly of himself, wrote to Innocentius, Prefect of Africa: "If you wish to feast on choice food, read the works of blessed Augustine, your fellow countryman. His writings are as fine wheat. Seek not for our bran."⁶ It is well known that Adrian I was in the habit of quoting passages from Augustine, whom he styled "an eminent doctor."⁷ Again, Clement VIII, to throw light on the obscure features of abstruse debates, and Pius VI, in his Apostolic Constitution "Auctorem fidei," to unmask the evasions of the condemned Synod of Pistoia, availed themselves of the support of Augustine's authority.

Leo XIII, after mentioning writers earlier than Augustine, lauded the help afforded by him to Christian philosophy:

² Celestine to Venerius, Marinus, Leotius, Auxonius, Arcadius, Filtanius, and the rest of the Bishops of Gaul: epist. 21, c. 2, n. 3.

³ Gelasius to all the Bishops of Picenum (circa finern).

⁴ Hormisdas, epist. 70, to Bishop Possessor.

⁵ John II, epist. olim 3, to certain Senators.

⁶ Registrum epistolarum, lib. X, epist. 37, to Innocentius, prefect of Africa.

⁷ Hadrian 1, epist. 83, to the Bishops throughout Spain. Cf. Letter to King Charles on images, passim.

But it is Augustine who seems to have borne off the palm from all. Of towering genius and thoroughly versed in sacred and profane knowledge, he waged relentless war on all the errors of his age with matchless faith and equal learning. What part of philosophy did he have untouched? Nay rather into what part did he not make thorough search as when he unfolded to the Faithful the deepest mysteries of the Faith or defended them against the mad attacks of foes; or again when, brushing away the false theories of Academics and Manicheans, he laid a sure and solid foundation for human knowledge, or studied in detail the nature and source and causes of the evils which harass mankind?⁸

The different perspectives expressed by the different Roman Pontiffs reflect the central place Augustine occupies in ecclesiastical circles.

The Chief End of Human Existence

Pope Pius XI's also explored Augustine's idea on the chief end of human existence. He avers that Augustine made it the object of his strenuous endeavor that all men[women] should thoroughly learn and with conviction what was the chief end of their existence, what was the only way that led to true happiness. Augustine writes: "Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee"⁹ These words, in the mind of Pope Pius XI, asserts that Augustine while stating in sum the whole of wisdom, at the same time fittingly portrays God's love for us, the peerless dignity of mankind, and the unhappy plight of those who live estranged from their Maker. In our own time, when the creations of art and industry, products of mind or mechanical toil are being multiplied and with incredible speed are carried to every corner of the earth, our spirit, absorbed in creatures, grows too forgetful of its Creator, makes fleeting goods its goal to the neglect of eternal ones, and turns to personal and public harm, aye, to its own ruin, those gifts which it has received from a bountiful God for the purpose of extending the kingdom of Christ and of promoting its own salvation.

When Augustine addressed himself to discussing the last end appointed for manity, he makes haste to lay down the principle that those who wish to arrive thereto will make a fruitless endeavor, unless they submit themselves with docile

⁸ Encyclical "Aeterni Patris."

⁹ Confessions, Bk. 1, c. 1, n. 1.

obedience to the Catholic Church, since it alone is destined by God to enrich souls with the light of virtue, without which one of necessity strays from the right path and is driven headlong to imperiling his eternal salvation. After God had granted the gift of inspiration to the sacred writers, He entrusted the Bible to the Church, which His only begotten Son founded, for its safekeeping and authentic interpretation. By appealing to the miracles wrought by Christ the Founder, Augustine proved the Divine origin of the Church for its very inception.

The Church

Pope Pius XI observes that Augustine had emphatically asserted that this unity of the universal Church and her absolute inerrancy as a teacher, is derived not only from her invisible Head, Christ Jesus, who from Heaven "rules His body"¹⁰ and speaks by the lips of His teaching Church¹¹, but also for her visible head on earth, the Roman Pontiff, to whom the chair of Peter belongs by the lawful right of succession. For this line of Peter's successors "is that rock against which the haughty gates of hell do not prevail."¹² By incontestable right we "are kept within the bosom of the Church by a succession of priests from the chair of Peter the Apostle, to whom our Lord after His resurrection gave the charge of feeding His sheep, down to the episcopate of today."¹³

Now the Church has received from her Divine Spouse the treasures of heavenly grace conveyed mainly through the channel of the Sacraments. Hence, every loyal son of that Church, like the Good Samaritan, pours oil and wine into the wounds of the sons of Adam, to free the guilty from sin, to strengthen the weak and feeble, to mould the lives of the virtuous nearer to the ideal of holiness. Even granting that some minister of Christ may at times fail in his duty, does it therefore follow that the power was rendered helpless and void of efficacy? Let us listen to the words of the Bishop of Hippo: "I assert [he writes] and we all assert, that the ministers of so great a Judge should be just men. Let the ministers be just, if they will. If, however, they who sit on the chair of Moses refuse to be just I find my warrant of security in my Master, of whom His Spirit said: "He it is who baptizes."¹⁴

¹⁰ Enarrat. in Ps. Ivi, n. I.

¹¹ Enarrat. in Ps. Ivi, n. I.

¹² Psalmus contra partem Donati.

¹³ Contra epist. Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti, c. 4, n. 5.

¹⁴ In Johannis Evang., tract. 5, n. 15.

The Trinity

Augustine bent the powers of his lofty genius to a study of the greatest of all mysteries, one which so many Fathers who had gone before him, with well-nigh infinite perseverance and unexampled enthusiasm had maintained against the wicked assaults of heretics. We meant the adorable Trinity of Father and Son and Holy Ghost in the unity of the Divine Nature. Aided by light from on high, he treated this central, this fundamental truth of the Catholic Faith with such depth and acuteness, that the Doctors who came after him had only to draw from Augustine's contributions their materials. From these they reared a staunch rampart of theological science to repel the missiles vainly aimed in every age by a perverse human reason that opposed this mystery, the most baffling of all to the mind of man. Let us hear the Bishop and Doctor of Hippo in his own words: "In the Trinity we predicate as distinctive of the several Persons the relations that exist among them, as Father and Son, and Holy Spirit, the Gift of both. For the Father is not the Trinity, nor is the Son the Trinity, nor is the Gift the Trinity. But this distinction of Persons with respect to one another, is not to speak to them in the plural as three (in nature), but as one, namely, the Trinity itself. Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God. So too the Father is good, the Son is good, the Holy Ghost is good. Again, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Ghost is almighty. But that does not mean that there are three gods, three good natures, three almighty natures; but one God, who is good, almighty, the Trinity. The same form is to be followed, when there is question not of their relations to one another, but of any attribute shared by each and all in common. For in this way they are described according to their essence. In the Trinity the essence, greatness, goodness, wisdom is without difference, and so of every absolute attribute predictable of a Person in Himself or of the whole Trinity."¹⁵

Elsewhere he makes use of well-chosen illustrations to enable us to arrive at some understanding to the mystery. Thus, for example, he dwells on the image of the Trinity reflected in the human soul, when it advances towards holiness; for, being mindful of God, it both thinks of Him and loves Him. In this way we catch a faint glimpse of the manner in which the Word is begotten by the Father,

¹⁵ De Trinitate, Bk. VIII, proem., n. I.

"Who in some sort has spoken in His coeternal Word all that belongs to Him substantially"¹⁶.

In the *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine traces with surpassing skill the God's guiding and ruling hand in the march of human history. In the successive steps that marked the growth of human society, his keen vision discerns and identifies two cities, which "two loves" had founded, "namely, the earthly City, built by love of self even to contempt of God, the heavenly city, by love of God even to contempt of self."¹⁷ Babylon is one, Jerusalem the other. The two "are intermingled and hold a mingled course from the beginning of the human race to the end of time."¹⁸ But the issue of both is not one and the same, since at long last the citizens of Jerusalem will reign with God forever, while the subjects of Babylon in company with demons will eternally expiate their crimes. Accordingly, to the mind of Augustine the history of human society is nothing else than a portrayal of the uninterrupted outpouring of God's love upon us. There can be no salvation in the ideal of the earthly City, as it sets before its eyes a vain picture of completeness and perfection. For scarcely anyone will take such an ideal seriously or, if he does, the prize he wins will be only the satisfaction of empty and fleeting glory.

Divine Grace

Augustine's keen mind analyzes and surveys how the grace of God, by an inward and hidden action, moves the human mind and will. The efficacy of this Divine grace, he had himself experienced, when he saw the darkness of doubt in the sudden change of mind he so wonderfully underwent at Milan. "How sweet it became for me of a sudden [he writes] to lack the sweetness of vain pleasures! It was now a joy to renounce what I had dreaded losing. Thou, sweetness true and perfect, didst set me free from them. As Thou wast ridding my heart of them, so didst Thou enter in their stead, more delightful than any pleasure – though not to flesh and blood; brighter than any light, but deeper than any secret; loftier than any honor, but not to men lofty in their own conceit."¹⁹

So closely did he study the subject and with such happy results, that he was

¹⁶ De Trinitate Bk. XV, c. 21, n. 40.

¹⁷ De civitate Dei, Bk. XIV, c. 28.

¹⁸ Enarrat. in Ps. Ixiv, n. 2.

¹⁹ Confessions, Bk. IX, c. I. n. I.

deemed the Doctor of Grace and was so entitled. He led the way for all other Catholic writers of later ages, to whom he reached a helping and a restraining hand, lest in their discussion of these intricate problems they err one way or the other: either by teaching that free will in man[woman], once his/her original justice was lost, is but a name and no more, as the early Protestants and the Jansenists held; or that divine grace was not a free gift and was not all-powerful, as the Pelagians kept repeating.

Augustine teaches that, ever since our first parents sinned, man has lost the perfection with which he was created; for when he possessed it, he was borne easily and smoothly along the path of virtuous conduct. On the contrary, in the present condition of our mortal life, he must resist evil and master the desires that lead and lure him astray in the way described by the Apostle: "But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law²⁰ of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members."²¹ Once we begin to refrain from sinning, we shall little by little blunt the edge of the enemy's attack and sap his strength; until at length we shall win our flight to that place of repose, where triumph and boundless joy will be ours. The credit of the victory is to be ascribed solely to the grace of God, which within us gives light to the mind and strength to the will, when we rise superior to so many hindrances and contests. It is the grace of God, We say. For as He created us, so is He able, through the treasures of His wisdom and power, to set aflame and fill our hearts wholly with His love. Hence the Church, which from the fountains of the Sacraments turns the stream of grace into our souls, is rightly entitled holy. Christ Jesus, our kind Master, inspires us to implore the gifts of His grace, when he says: "Ask, and it shall be given to you: seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone that asks, receives: and he that seeks, finds: and to him that knocks, it shall be opened."²² The very gift of perseverance "can be won by humble petition." For that reason, public and private prayer never fails in God's churches.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the major ideas in Pope Pius XI's encyclical letter, *Ad Salutem*, focussing on the Pontiff's reflection on the perspectives of his

²⁰ Matt. vii. 7-8.

²¹ Enarr. in Ps. cxviii, sermo 31, n. 1.

²² I Cor. iv, 7.

predecessors on Augustine, the position of Saint Augustine on the chief end of human existence, the church, the trinity and divine grace. A cursory glance at the work put together and their continuous relevance, reveals that truly, Augustine is a luminary among ecclesiastical teachers.